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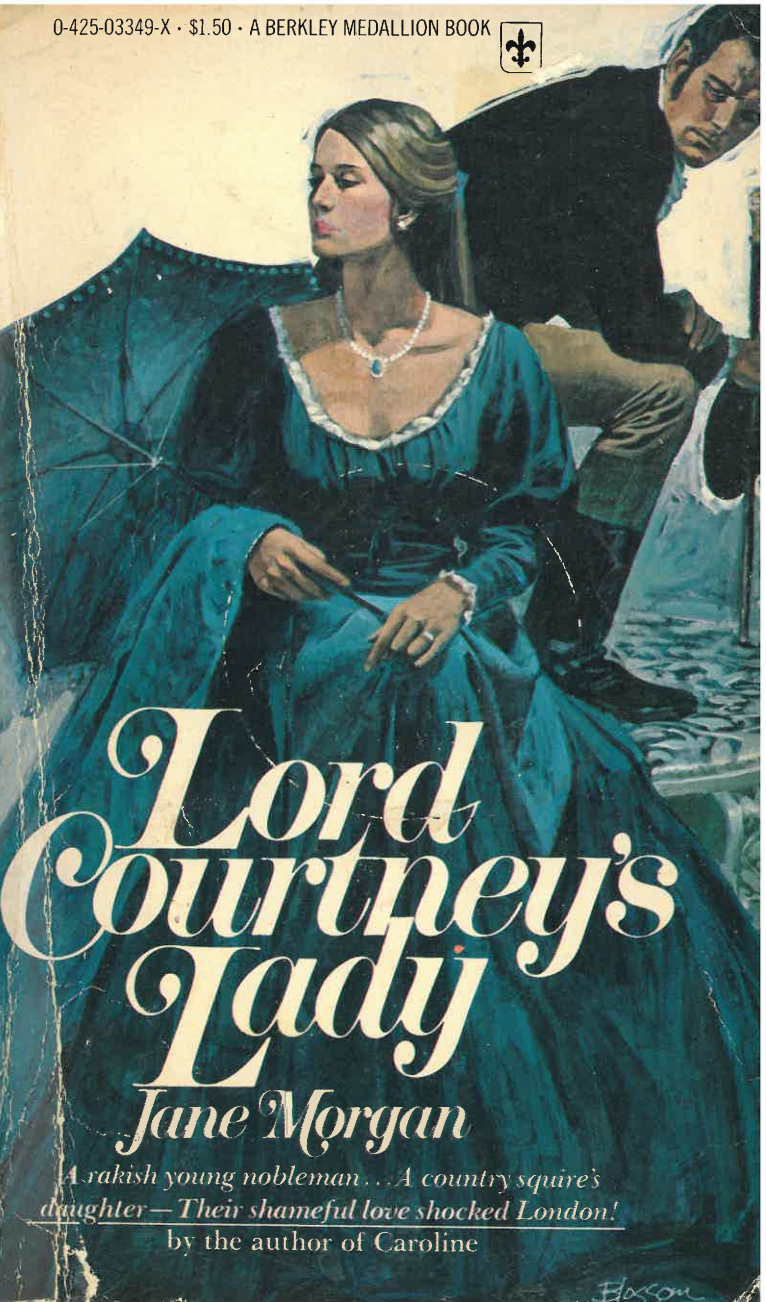

# Lord Courtney's Lady

## Jane Morgan

*A rakish young nobleman . . . A country squire's daughter — Their shameful love shocked London!*

by the author of Caroline

# A UNION DESTINED FOR DESTRUCTION

Society whispered knowingly of Lord Courtney's abrupt marriage to a girl of no social standing. And, though he tolerated no slurs on her dignity, his chronic carousing left less than bliss in their marriage bed. So Susan's spiteful flight with a conniving French count seemed like grounds for a scandalous divorce.... Until she found herself held captive—for a ransom more precious than gold....

A superb romantic novel of Regency England.

# Lord Courtney's Lady

Jane Morgan

A BERKLEY MEDALLION BOOK
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# *I*

It had been a fine day, but it was getting late and the gentleman in the curricle was in a hurry. The sun was beginning to shine unpleasantly in his eyes when the road took a westward turn, and the light was beginning to play tricks on him—or was it his own fatigue? He had been driving for several hours. It was just possible that his skill with the ribbons was deteriorating, as the expressionless second gentleman, in the passenger's seat, could probably have told you. But no one asked his opinion, and it was not his place to comment.

The carriage was a fine vehicle, a fashionable sporting model painted maroon with the wheels picked out in bronze. It was well crafted and beautifully sprung, so that except for the inevitable dustiness of an open-bodied conveyance, it was comfortable for trips of almost any length. At present, it was being driven from a select hunting lodge in an obscure corner of Lincolnshire all the way to London. So far, the pace had been leisurely, but now, anxious to reach Ely before nightfall so that he might make an early start for Newmarket in the morning, the driver whipped up his sweet-stepping greys, and the curricle bowled along smartly.

It might have been because he was tired, it might have been because the horses were tired and nervy, or it might have been a combination of circumstances, but whatever it was, calamity struck as the curricle proceeded briskly down a perfectly smooth, straight piece of road. A large brown rabbit shot across the road. One of the horses shied, and pulled, and before the driver could bring the pair properly to order, five or six smaller rabbits exploded

out of the hedgerow and ricocheted all over the road, between the horses' feet and under the wheels in a mad, panicked dash to follow their mother. The greys, outraged, reared and plunged, while the driver, disconcerted by what he imagined to be the sounds of little rabbits being crushed and mangled in the wheelwells, hauled haphazardly on the reins. The curricle lurched unevenly towards the side of the road, caught a nether wheel in the ditch, and then slid slowly, inexorably down onto the axle, which bore the weight bravely for a breathless moment before it cracked, split, and shattered.

This was the scene that met Squire Whalley as he jogged easily along on his way home from a neighboring village. The dashing maroon curricle lay askew in the roadway, one damaged wheel still revolving drunkenly. A large man, whom the Squire with difficulty identified as a liveried servant, was doing his best to calm the skittish pair. Another man, exquisitely attired in clothes which had obviously been made for him by a tailor of considerable talent, stood in the center of the road. His contribution seemed to consist exclusively of emitting a fluent stream of aristocratically articulated and astoundingly vile curses. Squire Whalley reined in his sleepy-eyed cob.

The gentleman, upon perceiving him, stopped cursing, smiled ruefully, and enquired how far it might be to the nearest village. The Squire, who had a characteristic weakness for the nobility, smiled in turn and opined that it was a matter of nearly three miles. He went on, however, to introduce himself, and, pointing just up ahead to where a modest lane cut off from the highway, offered the hospitality of his home. The gentleman smiled again, a charming smile. After a barely perceptible pause, he accepted the offer, and in a very few minutes he turned into the lane, making gracious conversation with the Squire, who walked along beside him, leading the plodding cob. The other man followed, leading the greys, and the curricle was left, for the moment, to the hazards of fate.

"'Lakewood Huntingdale,'" giggled Susan, middle

daughter of three. "It doesn't sound like a person; it sounds like a place!"

"But 'Courtney'—That's a place, only it sounds like a person," put in Margaret, the youngest, who was sixteen.

"However, since he is a Peer," observed Lucy, "he is called by his place-name—"

"Which sounds like his given name—"

"And his given name sounds like the name of his estate." Susan giggled again. "Perhaps we've got it all wrong. Perhaps it's really Courtney Huntingdale of Lakewood."

"Or Courtney, of Lakewood-Huntingdale."

All three girls giggled delightedly, certain that a person with such a ludicrous name could not fail to be ludicrous in himself, and offer a fair subject for jest for days to come.

"Is he gorgeous?" wondered Lucy.

"I day-ar say," drawled Susan.

"Does he wear silks and gold lace, and have a silver hanger by his side?"

"Oh, indubitably," said Susan. "But will he be powdered and patched? Will he take snuff, so, from a carved jade box from Cathay? Will he carry a *fan*?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Meg. "Men don't carry fans, not even Maccaronis."

"They do! I read it in the latest *Gazette*. They carry fans and wear the most idiotic tiny little hats on top of their enormous wigs."

To prove her point, Susan rummaged under the table for the magazine. When she found it, the girls all gawked and snickered, and then minced around the room on imaginary high heels and peered at each other through imaginary quizzing-glasses. Then with one accord they howled, "Mama!" and went tumbling out of the room.

Susan, who usually did, arrived first.

"Mama," she reproached a pretty, fluttering little woman who was giving confused orders to an even more confused maid. "*Who* is Lakewood Huntingdale, and why are we to put on our best dresses for dinner?"

"But I told you, my dears," replied Mama. "He is Earl

of Courtney, and he is stopping the night. Your father picked him up somewhere."

"Where?" cried Susan.

"How?" cried Megan.

"Why?" cried Lucy.

But their questions were not to be answered. Mama was much more concerned with the state of her best linens than with such trivialities.

"Is he gorgeous?" said Susan.

"When shall we see him?" said Megan.

"Is he patched and pompous? Does he speak with a supahb accent?" said I ucy.

"Is he gorgeous?" asked Susan, again.

"As a matter of fact," said Mama, "I think perhaps he is. And then again, in a way, he is not. If you see what I mean. At least, I daresay these sheets will do, the ones Mama hemmed for my honeymoon. They are quite the loveliest lawn, and Mary Jane, if you will be sure to turn out the mattress, and... Oh, dear, there's *dinner*! Whatever shall we do for dinner? Girls, girls, I wish you would not stand about under foot. We have so much to do!"

Mrs. Whalley shooed her daughters with her apron, and bustled off downstairs with a somewhat giddy Mary Jane in her wake.

"A brace of pheasant, Mary Jane; there's a nice brace of young pheasant, and a ham. Now, if we could get Jeremy to catch some of those good brook trout—"

"Trout?" cried Susan, from the landing. "You want Jeremy to go catch some trout? I'll go tell him!"

She flashed down the stairs, brushing past her mother.

"Mind you stay out of the gentlemen's way, now!" shrieked Mama. "Sukey, your hair! Where is your fichu? And Sukey, where are your *shoes*?"

It was too much, really too much to expect, thought Susan, that they should wait patiently and demurely upstairs till dinnertime, before catching a glimpse of this providential Earl. Susan had never seen an Earl; she had, once or twice, caught sight of Sir Harold driving in his lumbering old-fashioned barouche, but though he was the

most exalted personage the little village of Hawley had to offer, he was only a baronet, and middle-aged besides. Why, precisely, the age detracted from Sir Harold's interest as a man of status, Susan was not sure, but her instinct told her that it did. Of course, this Earl might also be middle-aged, for all she knew, but, well, an Earl was bound to be better than Sir Harold, no matter how old. Tossing her brown curls, Susan made her way into the kitchen, and thence out through the garden door.

The first person she encountered was a very large gentleman walking a handsome grey horse about the courtyard. The horse seemed to have a slight limp in his left fore. Susan sauntered over, taking note of the man's brown and cream suit, the lace at his cuffs, and the modish but modest curl to his hair. She eyed his watch chain and the buckles on his shoes, and the small gold ring in his finger.

"Spavin forming, d'you think?" she asked nonchalantly. Susan was not entirely sure what a spavin was, but she knew it was something that went wrong with horses' legs, and she thought it sounded knowledgeable.

"Yust a bit of a strain, Ma'am, I think," said the gentleman.

Susan was nonplussed. She had begun to think well of the Earl, as a man who cared about his horses and was not above seeing to them himself, but it didn't seem quite dignified for him to call her "Ma'am," and he spoke rather like a foreigner. What sort of an Earl was that?

"You had a mishap, in the road," she remarked, opening the way for further conversation.

"Yes, ma'am. No one was hurt, fortunately, except Dombey, here." The man smiled. "Though his lordship might consider that more of a disaster than any other."

Susan's eyes widened. The man must be a . . . a groom or something. She eyed his watch chain and his lace with even more curiosity.

"You are his lordship's. . . ?"

"Valet, Ma'am," supplied the large man. "Gustaf Sunnansjössen, at your service."

"Well," said Susan. "I hope you will be comfortable

here." She inclined her head politely. "And that Dombey recovers well."

Pondering, she passed on. If that was the valet, with those fine white stockings and satin facings to his coat, what could the Earl himself be like? Probably, Susan told herself, a hideous little wizened fellow, bent over, dark and sly, with a clubfoot, maybe, and an air of sinister aloofness. She struck an attitude, and pulled in one shoulder to be higher than the other. She succeeded somehow in slouching and mincing at the same time, holding an invisible quizzing-glass over the bridge of her nose, and an invisible ivory-handled walking stick—no, a sword-stick, for sure—in her hand.

The pose crumbled into a violent start, as a testy voice behind her enquired, "Sukey, what in the name of...?"

Susan whipped round, and flushed scarlet as she saw bearing down upon her her father, looking bewildered and annoyed, and what was unmistakably Lakewood Huntingdale, strolling by his side. From the top of his neatly dressed dark head to the toes of his glossy black boots, Lakewood Huntingdale was everything that Susan could possibly have asked for in an Earl. His elegant driving costume of pale buckskin and blue superfine was spotless. Snowy Mechlin eddied at the base of a long, graceful neck and tumbled over thin white hands, from one of which flashed the colorless flame of a diamond. Susan stared. She couldn't imagine what had possessed her mother to say he was not gorgeous. He was the most incredibly gorgeous creature out of a story-book romance Susan had ever dreamed of.

Her father coughed.

"Oh," said Susan mildly, "don't mind me. I'm a bit off my head, that's all."

She took to her heels.

The Squire's roar of outrage followed, the soundwaves reverberating palpably from the nearby surfaces of trees and barn walls. Susan stopped in her tracks.

I am mad, she thought. I have gone mad in an instant. Now I shall be obliged to go back and apologize, and it will be much worse than if I had just stayed there with my

mouth hanging open. She dragged her feet back to where her father stood, crimson with mortification, by the Earl, whose face Susan could not bring herself to look at.

"Off your head!" muttered the Squire. "I should think you are. Where are the few wits and manners..." He gripped her by one shoulder, and could be felt to forcibly restrain himself from shaking his daughter till her teeth rattled. "My lord, I wish I could tell you that this is the hen-witted kitchenmaid, but in truth it is my middle daughter Susan."

"I'm afraid we startled you, ma'am," said the Earl, in so friendly a voice that Susan managed to raise her eyes from his boots and look at him. She found, to her amazement, that he had not the face of a fairy tale creature, but of a real man. His nose was rather too long and narrow for beauty, and one of his front teeth slightly overlapped the other. But it was a pleasant face, and the crisp blue eyes smiled understanding.

Susan smiled too.

"I'm sorry I ran, my lord. I was playing at make-believe, and I was embarrassed."

"Playing at make-believe?" said his lordship. "I do that often myself. A delightful occupation."

Susan's susceptible heart swelled with emotion, and, inspired to wonderful heights, she found it in herself to curtsey with decorum and grace, and make her way back into the house without another untoward word.

# *II*

The next few days passed in a dream for Squire Whalley's middle daughter. Starry-eyed, she followed the Earl about like a puppy, and, when admonished by an exasperated parent to behave, she would simply retreat a little way, and gaze rapturously from afar. Lord Courtney was perfect, Susan decided. His face was beautiful; his figure, manly and elegant. He had wit, and taste, and intelligence. Above all, he had charm. Oodles of charm. Great vats of it, said Megan scathingly, from which he ladles it out, like treacle to poor parishioners.

"You don't understand," explained Susan. "It's his natural way, to be polite and agreeable to everybody. It's a question of breeding."

This, of course, was too much to be borne. Meg and Lucy began to heap ridicule upon their dazzled sibling, and Susan was forced to seek refuge below stairs, with her friend and confidante of long standing, Martha, the cook. She allowed herself to be flattered, and fussed over, and settled down to the agreeable task of slicing tomatoes and cucumbers for supper. It was while she was thus engaged, eating almost as much as she sliced, that Susan was apprised of the news that the grommet had arrived from King's Lynn for his lordship's axletree, and, according to the blacksmith's boy, the curricle would be ready to roll by morning.

Susan was devastated.

His lordship, when informed, appeared delighted. He professed admiration for the wainwright, and commented that his only regret was in being obliged to quit the company of the Whalley's. The Squire coughed and mumbled a gruff remark which included the phrase

"happy to oblige." Mrs. Whalley smiled and fluttered and pleaded with the Earl to remain one more day, resting on the Sabbath before he undertook his journey south. Lord Courtney thanked her graciously, declined to presume any further, et cetera, et cetera, and in the end allowed himself to be persuaded to remain till Monday morning.

"I don't know, Gustaf," remarked his lordship, scratching his head with both hands as the valet pulled his monogrammed nightshirt down over his noble knees that night. "I'm a damn fool. Church, it'll be, the whole mortal morning. Prayers and 'In the Paths of Righteousness We Tread.' Hell. And interminable chitchat over the dinner table, and the old man's bloody pumpkins. How can anybody care so much about pumpkins? I ask you, is it worth it?"

"Pumpkins, my lord?" asked the valet.

"No..." The Earl smiled at his reflection in the small spotted glass on the wall. "I think it will be worth it; I truly do." The smile deepened, the blue eyes brightened to the color of the Aegean Sea on a summer's day. Still smiling, his lordship went to bed.

Next morning, he was the soul of good humor. He came cheerfully to church, and sang the hymns from memory, which impressed everyone most favorably. Occasionally, however, he did glance at the hymnbook he shared with Susan. Susan thought he had a lovely singing voice, a clear, articulate baritone. Lucy, who was musical contended it was a trifle flat, but it would have been hard to say whether she really thought so, or if she was just bent on mischief.

The vicar came to dinner, and while he rattled on about the lesson of the day, Susan succeeded in engineering a tête-à-tête with her Earl. She asked him to carry her basket, as she cut flowers for the table, and when Meg and Lucy, suitably bribed beforehand with a tortoise-shell comb and a treasured copy of *The Castle of Otranto*, declined to join them, Susan sallied forth into the rose garden. Lord Courtney followed along behind.

What exactly Susan intended to gain from this private

interview she didn't know, and at first, she was so assailed by unaccustomed shyness that she could not speak a word. She clipped roses with a serious, conscientious air, and laid them one by one in the broad, shallow basket the Earl carried on his arm. He too was silent for some time. The silence went beyond awkwardness and became comradely. Then, adroitly, his lordship began to draw Susan out, and soon she was chattering away quite naturally, free from restraint.

"It will be sadly flat here when you are gone," she remarked wistfully, as the basket filled up and the dinner hour approached.

"Indeed, my dear Miss Susan, London will not seem quite what it was. You have a pleasant life here."

Susan sniffed.

"You are very kind, but it's humbug. It's a dead bore, rusticating. Why, do you know, I have never been to a party? Unless you count having tea with the vicar and his aunt, which I *don't*. Except, of course, that his aunt lived in London for many years. Do you think I should like London?"

"I'm sure you would, under the right circumstances." He paused, and Susan was just about to ask what circumstances he meant, when he went on. "London is a wonderful place. It has something for everyone. Do you know what Dr. Johnson said?"

Susan tossed her head. "Of course. 'One can never tire of London, because everything in life is there.'"

Lord Courtney's eyes twinkled. "Just about that."

"Do you live in London always?"

"Dear me, child. Nothing is 'always.'"

But you, thought Susan, will be 'always' with me. And she fixed such an adoring look on the Earl that he eventually harumphed and suggested they get the roses into the kitchen before they began to wilt.

On the threshold of the kitchen door, they paused for a moment. Susan toyed with the flowers in the basket; she thought she felt her companion touch her hair, but when she looked up, his hands were by his sides.

"You like me, don't you, Lord Courtney?" she asked, struck by something in his face.

"I do, very much. You are pretty and bright and fresh, like the morning."

Susan went scarlet with pleasure, and by the time she had recovered herself enough to think of making some response, the Earl had gone upstairs, leaving the basket of roses on the kitchen table.

Susan perched beside them, swinging her legs thoughtfully as she arranged the blooms in a cut-glass bowl. Martha bustled about, putting final touches on the first courses. Mary Jane went upstairs to finish laying the table.

"He has a way with him," remarked Martha, to the air. "I'll own he has a way with him."

Susan swung her legs.

"But he'll be leaving tomorrow," said Martha. "It's been exciting, I don't deny that, but all the same, I'll be glad to see things back to normal hereabouts."

"Oh, Martha," said Susan.

Martha clucked her tongue bracingly. "You'll have forgot all about him, this fine Earl, three months hence."

"Never!" cried Susan.

"And more to the point, he'll have forgot you by Friday next."

"He won't," said Susan. "He'll remember me very well."

"No, but he'll forget you, me darlin', and that quicker than the cat can lick her ear." Martha warmed to her subject. "He's trifling with you, and no wonder. You make up to him shameless."

"I don't! He is only kind to me. Which is more," she added, "than anybody else in this house is nowadays."

Martha wiped her hands on her apron, in a gesture of emphasis.

"You take care how kind he is to you. I know his sort. No, don't you raise them hackles at me, Miss. I say I know his sort, and I do. I warn't always a fat old woman, and I learned summat of gentlemen like him in my day. I ain't saying he's a bad man, not to his own sort, maybe, but

he'd think no more of bringing you to ruin than you'd think of plucking a pretty flower in the field."

"Martha, you are very stupid when you speechify," said Susan rudely, and flounced up the stairs just in time to meet Mary Jane on the landing, ready to serve dinner.

The afternoon passed in what, to Susan, was a maddening alternation of dragging moments, at piquet with the vicar, and lightning half-hours, in conversation with the Earl. He revealed such awe-inspiring bits of information as the fact that his title was not his own.

"You aren't really an Earl at all!" cried Meg triumphantly, with a wicked glance full of I-told-you-so at her sister.

Lord Courtney laughed.

"No one is quite sure what is 'really' in these cases, I don't think. It is what they call a courtesy title, my father's second. He is a Marquess, Marquess of Rayne."

Susan favored her sister with a look of infinite scorn, and Meg scowled, quite deflated. Lord Courtney tactfully requested a song of Lucy, who went obligingly to the pianoforte, and gave her most charming rendition of "Where the Lilies Bloom." One by one, the rest of the party were induced to join in the music-making, and the evening ended with considerable jollity. A light supper was served, and then Sunday was over.

Alone in her room, despondent, Susan contemplated the manifold inequities of fate. She heard some unidentifiable squeaks and rustles from her sisters' room next door. She heard her father start to snore, and then abruptly stop. But after that, no matter how hard she listened, there was nothing on the night air but the chirping of crickets and the whisper of the light wind in the trees.

Morning came all too soon, and with it a whirlwind of activity. The Squire had to make an early start for the village, and went off with Meg in tow, to be deposited with the vicar for her lessons. Mrs. Whalley went to consult with Martha and Mary Jane about the baking for the week. Lucy holed up in the arbor with her newly acquired *Castle of Otranto*. Susan took it upon herself to

keep Lord Courtney company till the curricle was brought round from the wainwright.

"He's a good workman," she commented, "but Methody. He would have been considerably put out if you had wanted the carriage yesterday, it being Sunday."

His lordship professed himself glad he had not inadvertantly discommoded the wainwright.

Susan sighed. "How long will it take you to get to London?"

"That depends on how long I wish it to take. I might, I think, manage it in little more than, oh, ten hours, if I were racing. Mind that step, there." He offered his arm, and Susan took it, glancing in Lucy's direction to see if she was impressed by this mark of respect, but Lucy's nose was buried in her book.

"Do you race much?" asked Susan.

"Not that sort, not much. That's for the sort of sporting devil who will bet on anything, from his maiden aunt's age to next Wednesday's weather."

"Oh, really," said Susan skeptically.

"Really. There was a fellow who bet he could jump his horse right over the dinner table at one of the Prince's soirees. He did, too."

Susan wrinkled her nose. "It sounds rather silly to me. You don't do such things, do you?"

"Very rarely, my dear," he said.

They strolled to the bottom of the rose garden, following the path. It bordered the stream for a little way, then crossed over a rickety little bridge, and wound about in a stand of weeping willows. It was a perfect summer day—warm, with a light breeze and a few chantilly-cream clouds overhead. Susan was quiet. She watched the gentle flouncing motion of her skirt, right side, left side, as her feet moved her along.

"Tell me, my lord, what your life is like, in London. What is a typical day?"

Courtney seemed a bit surprised by the comprehensive nature of this request, but he smiled good-humoredly.

"A typical day. Well, on a typical day, one would ring

for one's chocolate at something like midday, maybe one o'clock, possibly two."

"Two o'clock in the afternoon! You don't get up till two o'clock?"

Courtney's eyes sparkled. "London is a wicked city, my child."

"Well, of course," said Susan, "but two o'clock! Well, do go on."

"So, as I say, one rings for one's chocolate, and then, while drinking it, one gives due consideration to the important question of the adornment of one's person. Upon arriving at a suitable conclusion, one shouts at one's man, because the particular coat wanted has not been pressed, and one makes much ado about why that coat and only that coat will do for the day. Then, while the coat is being hastily got ready, one sees one's hairdresser, or one's perruquier. Also, one's tailor, one's man of business, and whatever friends happen to be astir and calling earlier than oneself."

"You receive all these people in bed?" interjected Susan.

"Not precisely in bed," replied the Earl, with a straight face, "but *en négligé*. It is for this reason that the fashion of the banian has had such a marked success. Or is it perhaps vice versa?"

Susan looked slightly confused, a bit out of her depth.

"Do you know what a banian is, my dear child?"

"I think it is a sort of dressing-gown."

"Very right. In an Oriental design, comfortable, but leaving much scope for imagination and elegance. I have two. One from Persia."

"You are making game of me," said Susan.

Courtney smiled, a dimple appearing in one cheek. "You are right, I am. But only because your eyes are so beautiful when you open them very wide. And I do have a banian from Persia."

"I'm not surprised," said Susan. "What happens after the banian?"

"After. Well, after, there is the mail to be gone through.

A few letters, maybe, and then the really important stuff: the invitations. All except the most impossibly dull, of course, will be accepted. Then, one is ready to go out."

"Out where?"

"Everywhere. Mrs. A's salon, Lady B's At Home, a riding engagement with Mr. C and Miss D, a sporting engagement with Lord E, perhaps, fencing, or boxing, or shooting, and maybe a political debate at one of the coffeehouses. A visit of condolence to Sir F, a family obligation with Mrs. G, and Misses H and I. And by then, with any luck, it's time for dinner."

Susan laughed. "And after dinner?"

"After dinner? Don't leap over dinner! Dinner is the beginning of the high point of the day, which is the night."

Susan giggled again. "Very well. About dinner."

"Well, I won't bore you with details of dressing, again, but you must realize that if dressing in the morning was a serious business, well, dressing in the evening is infinitely more so."

"How can you laugh at it all, when you go right on doing it?"

Courtney smiled that same smile, with the dimple. "It's fun. One need not take something very seriously to enjoy it. In fact, many people would define enjoyment as precisely the absence of seriousness. And certainly the point of life is to enjoy it."

Susan stared up at him, trying to imprint his image on her mind, so that when he was gone, she would be able to recall exactly the set of his mouth and the color of his eyes.

"You are beautiful," he said softly. "Do you know?"

"If you think I am beautiful, that's enough for me."

"You are beautiful. If you were a London woman, you would know it. You would have spent so long before the glass, you would know precisely the strengths and weaknesses of your appearance, and have learned all the arts of highlighting the one and minimizing the other. Would you succeed in making yourself more beautiful, I wonder, or less?"

"I should ask you, and if you said I was less beautiful, I should not use those arts."

He caressed her cheek, and traced the line of her neck and the curve of one breast with a long white finger.

"You know what I intend to do with you, don't you? Why I have brought you to this secluded spot among the trees?"

"Yes," said Susan.

# *III*

The Squire came stamping through the hall in a state of some vexation. He hurled his hat onto the table with an oath.

"Is that you, Tom?" Mrs. Whalley appeared in the doorway, fluttering anxiously.

"Begad, it is. All the way to the village for no good reason!"

"But Mr. Briggs?"

Whalley snorted disgustedly. "It appears he has a mare about to foal. Though what she thinks she's doing foaling at this time of year is more than I can say. Briggs sent a boy to say he couldn't leave the mare, and would next week do as well. I've a mind to say next week will *not* do and he may go to the devil."

"Oh, but Tom..."

"Now, Mama." Whalley stemmed the imminent flurry of protests. "I'll see to it, right enough. Don't you worry."

They went together to the kitchen, where the Squire fortified himself with a draught and a heel of last week's bread. He commented upon the fine yeasty smell of the new bread, still rising, and then asked after his lordship. The curricle, he noticed, was waiting in the drive.

Mrs. Whalley looked vague. "Yes, the blacksmith's boy left it some time ago. The valet saw to him. I don't know where his lordship has got to. Martha and I..." She trailed off, looking round her as if the Earl might materialize from the pantry.

An investigation revealed only Gustaf, upstairs, packing his lordship's things and awaiting orders. Further investigation was fruitless, until at last Lucy was sought

out in her arbor. Oh, yes, she said, Sukey and her precious Earl had gone walking in the garden.

At first no one was much concerned.

"Poor child, she is so moonstruck!" said Mama. "I remember my first love. I was sixteen, and he was a strolling player. *So* handsome—black hair; and eyelashes, I'd swear they were three-quarters of an inch long! I went to see *Romeo and Juliet* seven times that summer, and each time I would go home and gaze at the moon through the windowpanes just waiting to hear, 'Hark, what light from yonder window breaks?' But Tom, why is it 'hark'?" she asked, in sudden confusion. "I always thought 'hark' meant 'listen'. But it doesn't make sense to say 'listen, there's a light'. One would say 'look, there's a light.' Wouldn't one? Well, I daresay it was all very silly of me, but he was *so* handsome!"

"Do you find his lordship so handsome?" Whalley teased her.

"Oh, not half. But he is an Earl, and that adds a little something extra. Poor Sukey! She will cry when he's gone, but then one fine day she will wake up and realize she doesn't even really remember his face, and wouldn't recognize him in the street, like as not. And then someday she will find herself a fine, stalwart man like her papa, and live happily ever after!"

She smiled fondly at the Squire, who patted her hand. The look on his face became preoccupied when Martha came bustling in. She was distressed, and when it seemed she wished a private word with the Squire, he found a way to accommodate her, without exciting his wife's curiosity.

Martha shook her head, and her broad face was creased with concern.

"Miss Sukey's a good girl, sir, as we all know, but she's willful, awful willful. And she's that taken with his lordship. Well, sir, I don't like to say nothing, but if she's been gone as long as they say she has, I think maybe someone had best go after 'em."

The Squire said nothing, but turned and went down to the barn. When questioned, Jeremy said he thought as

how he'd noticed Miss Susan and his lordship walking down by the stream, oh, maybe half an hour, maybe as much as an hour ago.

"An hour!" snapped the Squire. "'Od's blood, the girl's a bigger fool than I thought."

He set off towards the brook, proceeded across the bridge at a good clip, and strode down the path among the willow trees. Off to the left, there came a faint, sharp cry, quickly muffled.

"Rape, no less!" growled the father. "I'll kill him!"

He broke into a run, and Jeremy loped behind.

But when Whalley burst into the pretty little copse, green grass dappled with light and shade, there was nothing of rape in the scene which met his eye, nothing at all. There were no signs of a struggle. On the contrary, though Lord Courtney indeed lay prone among a welter of white petticoats, he seemed almost a prisoner, so tightly was his body entwined by his lover's arms and legs. He was breathing deep and slow.

Whalley felt a great, red rage boil up inside him. This slut on her back in the grass was his own sweet, silly, innocent daughter. Or had been. He raised his hand.

Drifting deliciously, lazily, back to full consciousness after the delirium of his passion, Courtney opened his eyes. The girl's face was still, serene. Lovely, he thought. He was not actively aware of having heard anything, but he had a sudden moment of flaring anxiety, and then something, something unbelievably painful, exploded across his back. Then came the Squire's voice, raw with fury, cursing fluently.

Ah, ha, thought Courtney, a horsewhip. Must be. That's what it always is in bawdy jokes.

The chaotic scene about him was barely perceptible to his stupefied brain. Susan, scrambling to throw herself protectively across his body, was roughly pulled away, kicking and screaming and crying. The sight of her, her naked breasts, her blood-stained petticoats, infuriated her father still further. He lashed out at her, catching her about the legs. This was one shock too many, and Susan

swooned away. She was carried off towards the house by Jeremy, slow, stolid Jeremy, whose face told nothing of his thoughts.

Whalley continued to wreak vengeance upon his daughter's seducer. Courtney lay still, wondering why he did not try to escape. He wished vaguely that he had not put off his coat and his waistcoat, which lay on the grass a few feet away. The Squire's lash cut through his shirt and his skin with an excruciating jar at each blow.

God, he thought, at last, I'm going to die. Father will be furious. Then he said, "That's enough, Whalley."

The Squire was so startled by the tone, that of a man speaking to an over-excited underling, that he hesitated, arm upraised.

"No more," said Courtney. "No more, or I'll see you on your way to Botany Bay, and your daughter in the filthiest brothel in London."

He lifted up on one elbow, and somehow twisted his head round to stare at Whalley with burning, vicious eyes.

"So stop now, man, or kill me."

He wavered, then, and fell into an awkward, angular position on his face. For one terrible moment Whalley thought he had killed him, but he quickly realized the Earl had only fainted. With an effort, he grasped the wounded man under the arms and dragged him down to the brook, where he splashed him liberally with the cold, clear water.

Coming to, Courtney thought for several seconds that maybe he'd just go ahead and die, and to hell with it all. Soon, however, he rallied.

"Whalley," he remarked weakly, more in the brook than out of it, "you are not a man of finesse." He blinked at the swirling water, murkily red. "Sacristi, I am bleeding like a pig."

"A fit enough thing," muttered the Squire, whose wrath still ran high.

This insult was enough to remind the Earl of his indignities, and he said sharply, "You're a fool, you know, Whalley. You've done your daughter more harm than I have. That hireling will make this escapade a story for everyone in the county to leer over, and the house servants

will corroborate how he brought her home disheveled and in hysterics."

The Squire sat down heavily on a rock, and said nothing.

Courtney began to feel very much as if he were going to vomit. His flayed back hurt more than he had ever imagined anything could hurt, and he wondered if he would ever again be capable of standing on his feet. He considered crawling a little further into the stream, to where the water could wash over his wounds, but he decided he might pass out again and drown. He wished he might go to sleep, but his back hurt too much. He also wanted to get up, but his back hurt too much. He also wanted to strip off what remained of his shirt, but his back hurt too much. His back hurt too much to do any of the things he thought of doing, except vomit, and he swore he would not do that. Instead, he drank a little of the water in the stream, which was no longer running bloody. It made his stomach feel better but he was beginning to be cold. Some minutes later, he realized that he was really very cold, and he stirred himself to move out of the brook.

The Squire, whose existence had been completely forgotten for some quarter of an hour, leaned down to offer a hand, and together they succeeded in getting Courtney to his feet. He leaned with the front of one shoulder against a tree.

"Get this shirt off me. Put it in the sun to dry. Now go away. Send my man."

Without speaking, Whalley followed these orders. Courtney waited till he heard the sounds of the man's departure, then he walked very slowly to a patch of grass where he could lie with his torso in the shade and his legs in the sun. He collapsed, feeling once more very sick, and lay staring sightlessly at the grass for a grey-green eternity until Gustaf appeared.

From far away, the Earl heard a softly muttered oath in Swedish. He dimly perceived a familiar large form crouch down and felt a careful hand pass over his eyes, closing them.

"I'm not dead," he observed.

"No, my lord, but you must close your eyes."

Indeed, Courtney realized, his eyes were dry and hot and burning terribly. They began to feel better, though, when he rolled them inside their sockets, and the burning started to subside.

"How does it look?"

"Very ugly, my lord, but it is not as bad as it feels."

Courtney wondered in passing how Gustaf could know what it felt like.

"Your lordship would perhaps drink some brandy?"

Courtney felt suddenly, and oddly, as if he was going to cry. He took as much of the brandy as Gustaf would give him.

"Thank you. God, thank you for that."

He rested a while, allowing the spirits to take effect. They deadened the pain to some extent.

"The house?"

"Very quiet, sir," said Gustaf. "I was in the kitchen when Miss Susan came in. That would be about an hour ago."

An hour. Incredible, thought Courtney.

"Scandal?"

"No, my lord. Miss Susan came walking in with the man Jeremy. She said she had been out strolling with you, but her father had been so tiresome when he joined you that she left. Then she went straightaway up to her room. I do not think anyone saw her but the cook and myself."

"Oh, bravo," said Courtney. "Never would have thought she had it in her."

Gustaf did not think it necessary to mention that poor Susan had been so pale and shaky that her charade would not have fooled a blind man.

"God, that man... so bloody quiet on his feet. Where in hell did he spring from? He was to be absent all the morning."

"The man he went to meet was unable to keep the appointment, my lord," said Gustaf.

"Sweet Christ, I'd like to kill him." It was unclear whether the Earl referred to Squire Whalley or the unreliable Mr. Briggs. It seemed likely he meant both.

"My lord, you must get up to bed. Your wounds must be dressed."

"Oh, God, I shall be obliged to put on clothes." Courtney shuddered at the thought.

"Drink the rest of the brandy, my lord," was the valet's suggestion.

Somehow, between the two of them, they got the Earl up and into his clothes once more. The long skirts of his coat covered much of the damage done to his breeches by blood and water and dirt, and though his shoes and stockings were muddy, this was not so noticeable. As to his face, livid and drawn, there was nothing they could do, but Gustaf felt that, viewed from a distance, his lordship's appearance would not attract undue attention. They would simply have to hope not to meet anyone. Gustaf half carried his employer, so long as they remained hidden in the woods, but when they got to the exposed lawn, Courtney drew on substantial reserves of pride and obstinacy, and somehow managed to walk up and into the house with a step which, if it lacked its usual spring, at least did not falter.

"And probably," he remarked, panting inside the back door, "not a damned soul was watching."

One soul, however, had seen them. She hid herself behind the curtains of her room so that she could not herself be seen, but watched the progress of the two men across the lawn with concern, and some relief. She had been sitting there for an hour and a half, waiting for them. She had seen her father come in, had, in fact, heard him come upstairs and locked her door against him; and she had seen Gustaf go out. Now, when the valet and his master arrived at the back door, Susan ran out into the hall. Thinking better of the impulse, she went back into her own room, and listened. She heard the men come up the stairs, and then, in an agony of suspense, she slipped out into the hall again and down to the spare bedroom, where the door was closed, and, she found, locked.

In response to her knock, the valet opened the door, but blocked it with his body so that she could not see inside. He told her that, though his lordship was certainly

not feeling quite the thing, he was not in too bad a state. He was, however, much fatigued, and not up to receiving visitors. He would look for her a little later. Cowed, and not a little mortified, Susan went away.

In point of fact, Courtney was unconscious, sprawled across the bed, his face grey, his legs trembling spasmodically. He was once more in shock. Gustaf, having disposed of Susan, returned to work, with his customary quiet efficiency. Soon he had his patient stripped, washed, bandaged, and warmly covered up in bed. He had recovered consciousness once or twice, but for the most part he had been senseless, which Gustaf considered a blessing.

As soon as the Earl was asleep, and resting quietly, Gustaf left the room and proceeded rather noisily downstairs. He remained out of sight long enough to allow Susan the opportunity of slipping into the room and satisfying herself that his lordship was well enough, for Gustaf was a sensitive and compassionate man. Then he came back upstairs and stayed by the bedside for the rest of the afternoon. Courtney slept soundly for three hours, woke up for some more brandy, and then slept on and off for the rest of the day. Meantime, the repaired curricle was put away in the barn, according to Gustaf's instructions, and the same severe migraine that had explained his lordship's failure to take to the road also explained his absence from dinner.

Mrs. Whalley was distressed, and fluttered and fidgeted, but Gustaf assured her that there was nothing she could do. His lordship was subject to these headaches, and would require a full day of absolute rest and solitude to recover. He subtly implied that there was not much use in trying to balk the whims of an autocratic personage such as his employer, and Mrs. Whalley subsided. But later that evening, Gustaf got proof—if any was needed—that what he had hinted was all too true. Lord Courtney got it into his head that he would get up, and the valet was powerless to change his mind. So, with difficulty and considerable pain, the Earl got up and dressed, expediting the process by downing copious quantities of brandy. By

the time he went downstairs, he looked presentable, but he was very drunk.

In the parlor, Meg and Lucy were playing at fox-and-geese, and Mrs. Whalley was darning shirts. Apparently, the Squire had decided to keep his own counsel about the affairs of the morning, at least for the time being, for the ladies all greeted Courtney with solicitous enquiries about his headache, which he professed to be still troubling him a good deal. He had, however, wished to come down for just a moment, to present his apologies for trespassing yet another day on Mrs. Whalley's delightful hospitality. Mrs. Whalley made a predictable, polite, self-deprecating reply. They all made sociable conversation for a few moments, Courtney ascertained that Susan had retired to her room, and that Squire Whalley was doing accounts in his office. Then, having got what he came for, he left.

Whalley was, indeed, in the little brown room that served as his office, but his accounts were going slowly, for although there was a full pot of ink and a new quill on the table in front of him, the pen had not been sharpened and the lid on the inkpot was closed. He was lighting a pipe when Courtney, with very little ceremony, invaded the room.

"Good evening, Whalley," he said.

He took a quick turn about, four paces this way and that, and then repeated, "Good evening, Whalley," in a somewhat sharper tone.

The Squire said, "Evening, my lord."

Courtney took another four paces, then halted in his tracks, fixed his host with a steely, if rather opaque, eye, and said, "In accordance with the conventions, I wish to request permission to make your daughter an offer. Of course, it makes no odds whether you grant permission or not, but I'm willing to try and salvage a modicum of good form out of this business."

"An offer?" repeated the Squire truculently. "An offer of what?"

"Whalley," snapped his lordship, "you are a boor."

He turned on his heel, and stalked out of the room.

Exasperated and disgusted, and not a little afraid that

his contentiousness might have endangered what little chance Susan did have of reparation, the Squire made haste to seek her out, but by the time he discovered she was supposed to be in her room, and arrived there, she had gone. He knew a moment of dread, and then he heard the click of the latch on the door to the sewing room at the end of the hall, and, once more judging it best to wait and see, went back down to his office to smoke his pipe.

Inside the sewing-room, gay with yesterday's roses and coolly filled with early evening twilight, Susan stood anxiously confronting her lover, who felt somewhat less drunk and slightly more affable at the sight of her. She looked so vulnerable, and she was trying so hard to be brave. Her eyes were downcast, and her hands were tightly clasped in what was meant to be an attitude of composure, but her back was straight and her shoulders square.

Courtney approached her with a soft step, hoping she would not be able to tell how foxed he was. His head swam.

"Good evening, child. How are you feeling?"

"Well, my lord. And yourself?"

The big brown eyes were unveiled for a moment, and seemed to look straight into his soul.

He is very unwell, thought Susan. He looks quite old.

"I am tolerably comfortable, considering," he said. He took one of the cold little hands, and raised it as near as he could to his lips. "I wished to ask you, my dear, if you would do me the honor of becoming my wife."

Susan froze. She didn't even breathe. She gave the Earl another searching glance, and then dropped her eyes once more.

After a long time, choking, she replied, "You are very kind, my lord. Very kind indeed."

"Then we can consider it settled." Courtney seemed ready to have done with the interview.

"Oh, but it is not settled," put in Susan. "I mean, it is, but not in the way you mean. I shan't marry you."

"A singularly heartless and ill-mannered refusal, I

think," said the Earl stonily, after a moment of astonished silence.

Susan looked at him again, and saw for the first time what sort of temper he had. His blue eyes were almost black, and his mouth a thin horizontal slash. He was furious.

Taken aback, Susan stammered, "I'm sure there is a polite, proper way to say it, but I... I can't think of the words right now."

Frightened little tears formed in the corners of her eyes, and trickled down the sides of her nose.

Courtney took an abrupt new tack.

"Is your love such a short-lived thing that it blooms in the morning and fades by nightfall?" His voice was gentle.

Susan collapsed into a chair, sobbing.

"You know it isn't so! You are unfair. Unfair!"

"Unfair?" cried the Earl, his patience evaporating once more. "Damnation! I can't seem to get a rational word out of you. I am very tired, and in a great deal of pain. I have no mind to play at guessing games. If you are unwilling to marry me, I think I have a right to be given a reasonable explanation, without a lot of dramatic ballyhoo. Lachrymose females, my dear, are at the best of times a terrible bore, and this is hardly the best of times. Cease your sniveling and speak your mind like a sensible human being, and then I shall leave you to repine over your folly in peace."

Susan was so stung by the injustice of this tirade that she forgot to cry.

"*My* folly? Did I do it all alone, then?"

"You are the ruined virgin, not I," retorted the Earl, ignobly.

"I would never marry a man who had to be forced into taking me!"

"*Forced*? Damn your eyes, girl, you are quite insufferable! Your father is a barbarian; he couldn't force me to spit in his face! I could have him transported, if I chose..." He stopped, and passed a hand over his eyes. "But I do not choose, so you needn't look at me like that.

Now I'm asking you once more to say you'll marry me, Susan. Just say it; there's a good girl."

"Yes, my lord," said Susan.

"Very good. No, wait. Come here, darling, come close." She did, and stood very near him, face to face. She could smell the spirits strong on his breath. "Tell me, are you sorry for this morning? Are you sorry you gave yourself to me?"

Susan blushed, but she shook her head.

"I'm afraid I hurt you..."

"I should not have cried out," she blurted, blushing still deeper. "He found us because I cried out, I'm sure. I am sorry for that!"

"*You're* sorry. Oh, God." Courtney let his cheek rest wearily against her hair. "I was a damn fool."

They stood so for several minutes. Susan felt his weight was heavy against her, and she wished he was sober.

# *IV*

When Martha bustled in with a dish of fresh strawberries, drowned in new cream, Susan was lying on her bed with her head resting on her arm and her eyes fixed on the crocheted coverlet. In Martha's estimation, she had not been acting like a girl whose wildest dreams have just come true.

"I never did understand, myself, why young ladies in love needs must go off their feed," said Martha, and closed the bedroom door behind her. "Sure now, and you haven't et more in these three days than would keep a bird just this side of starvation. Is it pining for your lover you are? Or have you changed your mind about him, now you've got him?"

"I haven't got him," said Susan.

"That you have, and I'll own I was never so surprised in my life! All them things I said to you the other day—I was wrong, dead wrong. His lordship knows what's true and what's handsome, in spite of his station in life. A good man, to my mind."

Susan lifted her head and gave a little smile.

"You've changed your tune mightily, Martha."

"Never was one to refuse to admit a mistake. Here, you eat these strawberries, now, and mind your manners. You're going to be a Countess!"

Susan's eyes clouded over, and her lids quickly covered them.

"Are you frightened, lass, of them elegant folk?" Martha stroked her hair. "You've no call to be. You're a clever child, and you can behave as pretty as anyone when you put your mind to it. You'll learn their ways quick enough."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of them," said Susan.

She brought the spoon up to her mouth, one red strawberry island in a sea of cream, but it failed to tempt her. She lowered the spoon again. Martha took the dish away, and sat down on the bed, which gave a loud creak. She took Susan's hands in both of her own large, meaty ones, and gazed earnestly out of her birdlike little eyes. Susan would not meet them.

"What is it, my love? What's troubling you so? You know your secrets won't go no farther nor one ear of mine."

Susan looked down at the four hands, folded together.

"Well... it's just that... everyone makes so much of it, and it will come to naught in the end."

"And why do you say that?" asked Martha grimly, after a pause of some length.

"Well, I just know it."

"You're looking for him to jilt you? Did he ever give a hint of such, or is it only your megrims talking?"

Susan frowned. "He never said it, exactly, but he never meant to marry me, I know that. I thought perhaps... I thought he might ask me to come to London with him, but I didn't expect... Well, I didn't expect what happened."

"Didn't expect which?" The fat old cook's voice was soft and almost wistful. "Didn't expect what happened down in the wood, or didn't expect an offer of marriage?"

Susan flushed, and frowned the harder. She thought of the silken summer air, and the silken voice of the Earl, murmuring compliments and endearments. She remembered the gentleness of his kisses and the sureness of his hands, and his evident delight in her. Then she remembered him cold, and impatient, and barely able to hide his disgust with her. Tears prickled behind her eyes.

"Didn't expect any of it," she said. There seemed to be no point in denying what Martha believed had happened in the wood.

"And yet you might have, lass, if you'd listened to your old cook, hey?" It wasn't a reproach, but a sorrowful reflection.

"Well," said Susan, flinging her head up in defiance, "it was nice! I would do it again! Only a little different. I didn't ask him to marry me; *he* asked. And I told him no, too. But he went on and on at me, and so in the end I said yes, and now everyone will know he's made a fool of me!"

The tears did begin to flow, now, but at the same time Susan snatched up her feather pillow and pounded it and flung it across the room.

Martha was nonplussed.

"But what makes you so sure he'll jilt you?"

"Do you think my Lord Courtney is the sort of man to marry a nobody? He wanted a pretty, civilized way to get out of here without being any more embarrassed."

"Well, you're wrong there," said Martha, with feeling. "A man like that, it's twice as embarrassing for him to be thought to be lowering himself as it is to get up on his high horse and ride away with his nose in the air. Oh, no, if he didn't mean to marry you, he'd have said so, straight out. And been within his rights, too, miss. If you were so easy for him, how's he to know you won't lift your skirts likewise for the next pretty face as happens by?"

"Oh!" cried Susan. "Oh, you hateful old woman!"

Jumping up, she tried to slap Martha, but the cook was too quick for her. She caught her by the wrists, and for a moment the two scuffled vigorously. The little oak bedstead made high-pitched squeaky protests, and the bowl of strawberries was splashed all over the starched white apron and the brown woolen skirt, and the calico gown with the ruffled petticoats.

"What a beastly, *beastly* thing to say!" panted Susan, glaring.

"I never said it's what I think; I said it's what he might think," pointed out the wise, older woman.

The indignation on Susan's face was slowly replaced by distress.

"Martha." It was almost a whisper. "What if I have a baby? I almost think I should like one, you know, to remember him by."

"Foolish talk!" cried Martha. "A baby ain't a lace handkerchief, to be put in a box for a keepsake! A baby is

another human soul, a fearsome responsibility, to bring into this world for shame and scorn to be heaped upon, to be wanted by nobody but you, to have no place, and no name, and nowhere to stay, and nowhere to go to. I know!" said Martha, her round pink face showing unaccustomed wrinkles around the eyes and at the sides of her mouth. "I know."

Susan watched her, with enormous eyes, but the woman would say no more. It was an old sorrow, and she had long since put it behind her.

"So no more of this foolish prattle," she finished, brusquely. "You'll marry this Earl of yours, and if you have a child, it will be swaddled in velvets and fed with a silver spoon, and have all the best of this life."

"But if he doesn't intend to marry me?"

"If he don't intend, we'll make him intend," said Martha.

They were sitting there, rather blankly contemplating each other, and Susan wondered how on earth one could make Lord Courtney do anything, when the girl's sharp ears caught the sound of a horseman on the road leading to the sober, solid little brick house.

"Perhaps it's Gustaf," she said. "Perhaps it's Gustaf bringing a letter from the village, saying his lordship is desolated, he has unavoidably been called back to London, and will be in contact with us as soon as possible. That means never!"

She ran to the window, but couldn't see around the house, so she ran to the sewing-room, and in a moment she ran back.

"It is Gustaf. He has come from the inn, and I just know it's bad news, Martha. I just know it!"

"Well, you just tidy your hair, and trip on downstairs to pass the time of day, then. The sooner we know what's in the wind, the more time we'll have to prepare for it."

She grabbed the hairbrush. Susan rummaged under the bed for her shoes, which she never could seem to keep on her feet, and soon she made an appearance in the hall below, with most of the ravages of emotional excess repaired.

Gustaf greeted her courteously, as he always did, proffered greetings from the Earl, assured her that the village inn, to which they had removed for the sake of discretion, was in all respects satisfactory, and asked if he might have a word with her father.

"Well," said Susan to herself, "at least he hasn't gone away yet."

Ten minutes later she was pounding up the stairs in search of Martha, who had returned to her kitchen downstairs. Like a whirlwind, Susan tore through the house until she found her. The white face and imminent tears had disappeared; instead, the plump, pretty cheeks were flushed as if with fever, and the brown eyes were brilliant.

"Martha, Gustaf says somebody named White, a London lawyer, will be here tomorrow, with papers. Papa is to go to The Royal Arms in the morning. And Mama and I are to go to tea!" She laughed. "Tea, just like that. A tea party!"

"What sort of papers?" asked Martha, not suspiciously, but cautiously.

Susan looked vague. "Settlements, or something. And a special license. From the Archbishop of Canterbury."

"The Archbishop of Canterbury!"

"The Archbishop. To be married. On—Martha, what shall I *wear*?"

"*When*?"

"On..." Once more, she broke off, as if somehow superstitiously afraid to name the day. "On... Martha, on Friday!"

Courtney found the experience of arranging the settlement with Mr. Whalley to be mercifully a little less exasperating than he had anticipated. Whalley seemed quite overwhelmed by the fact that the Earl apparently did intend to go through with the marriage, and agreed to everything almost without comment. The sums involved were much beyond his experience, and it was with real embarrassment that he made mention of the small portion he could offer as Susan's dowry. Courtney replied

with acerbity, that he was not interested in a dowry. Mr. White suggested with tact that it might be most appropriate for Susan's portion to be shared between her sisters, but that perhaps there would be some items of personal significance that she might wish to include in the settlement as family heirlooms, or whatever. Courtney's look implied that there could not possibly be anything in Squire Whalley's possession worthy of the description "heirloom," but in fact there was a cut-crystal bowl, and a chased silver goblet that had been left to Susan by her maternal grandmother, and these, it was felt, were of importance enough to be mentioned in the legal documents. Whalley voiced an ill-received apprehension over the amount of pin-money Susan was to receive; Courtney pointed out that as a Countess she would be expected to conduct herself in appropriate style. Mr. White, the lawyer, succeeded once more in glossing over the infelicitous interchange, and soon the papers were signed, and duly witnessed. Squire Whalley and the vicar, who had served him as witness and counsel, prepared to depart. As they made their way from the private parlor at the rear of The Royal Arms, they passed a handsome young woman, strikingly dressed in black and white, who eyed them languorously, then, gathering her skirts in one elegantly gloved hand, moved past them through the narrow hall, and made her way into the room where Mr. White was gathering up his papers and quietly wishing his lordship joy.

"My darling," said the young woman, as Courtney moved forward to greet her, "you are without a doubt the greatest monster alive." She laughed musically, and kissed him lightly on the mouth. "The very greatest. You have made me wait an interminable time, after a perfectly horrible journey. The roads were appalling from Cambridge. It's a wonder I still have all my teeth in my head."

Courtney smiled, not very sympathetically.

"Did I invite you to come? I don't recall doing so."

"Well, of course not, but surely you expected me? You didn't imagine I would wait quietly in town to find out

what it was all about?"

"Yes, thank you, White," said Courtney, as the lawyer made overtures at leaving the room. "I think we have concluded our business. You may return to London if you like. I daresay Lady Zoe will wish to keep the coach, but I think the mail will be in soon."

Mr. White bowed, and assured Courtney he could make his own arrangements for returning to London, and then removed his discreet self from the parlor.

When the door closed, the Lady Zoe said in a low, vehement voice, "Rogue! Lee, what in the name of heaven are you up to?"

"Up to?" His lordship sauntered to the sideboard, and poured two glasses of a pale but passable madeira. "My dear love, I should have thought that would be perfectly obvious. I am getting married. Didn't I make it clear in my letter?"

"You're mad! Rayne will go into convulsions. Lee, it isn't a lark, you know, getting married."

"Do I imply it is a lark?"

He leaned one elbow casually but delicately on the sideboard, crossed one gleaming black boot over the other, and gazed mildly at his sister.

Zoe, who knew that look, despaired of making any headway, and so shrugged her fine, narrow shoulders, and dropped the subject.

"I have brought what you asked for." She produced a slim brown box and a small square one from the pockets under her skirts, and deposited them on the large mahogany table where the papers had been signed.

Courtney crossed over, opened first one box, then the other.

"Ah, yes. These will do well enough, I daresay." He held up to the light, the summer sunshine streaming through a window of narrow leaded panes, a ruby necklace which shone warm and full of life. Five wine-red stones, perfectly matched, hung from an intricately worked gold chain studded with ruby spacers. "Quite handsome."

"For the money, they had better be handsome. The

ring is very plain, but the stone the best of them all."

Courtney flipped open the smaller box. The jewel was not large, but flawless.

"As usual, your taste is exquisite, my dear."

"You didn't give me much to go on, I must say. Young, pale skin, dark eyes. You didn't even tell me if her hair is dark! If she is fair, rubies will be all wrong."

"I think I saw these," Courtney commented, ignoring the complaint. "Van der Hout tried to sell them to me a few months ago. But..." He flashed a quick grin. "The piece I bought was quite different."

"Do you refer," asked Zoe acidly, "to Lady Heather, or to that great diamond brooch she wears?"

"It is rather large, isn't it? I have never liked diamonds in a mass—too much of a good thing. Well, now, my love, shall we prepare ourselves to receive my intended?"

He extended a hand, and Zoe reached for it. Together, they went upstairs to their respective rooms.

"Aren't you going to tell me anything about her? What's she like? What's her family like? Are they all of the stamp of that great lumping father? Lee, really, you are too mysterious!"

"You'll see," said Courtney. "A man is never any judge of his own bride. You shall see for yourself."

It came as a shock to Susan, to find this exquisitely elegant creature, with her long neck, her lily-white skin, her sleek black hair dressed in a style the *Gazette* proclaimed to be only for the most classically beautiful, seated comfortably beside the tea table when she and her mother arrived. Susan's best flowered silk looked suddenly dowdy, and her escaping brown curls seemed traitorous. The Earl himself appeared critical and forbidding, and for some moments Susan wished herself at the far side of the earth. But, little by little, Zoe's supremely good manners and Mrs. Whalley's trusting unselfconsciousness began to put her at ease. By the time tea was over, and Zoe was left again alone with her brother, she had gained a pretty fair impression of Susan's natural vivacity and her innocent charm.

"A lovely child," she told Courtney. "With a little

London polish, she will carry the rubies off well."

"I don't see why not. She's not, perhaps, what Her La'ship would choose for me, but perhaps it no longer seems so mysterious to you why I have chosen her for myself."

"On the contrary," said Zoe. "I am more mystified than ever." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "But I like her."

"But Mama!" squealed Susan. "I wore that dress to tea on Thursday. Lady Zoe will think I only have one dress."

"Well, my dear, I'm afraid the truth is you only have two. You'll be obliged to wear one or the other twice in Lady Zoe's company; no way out of it. Either the silk you wore on Thursday must go to church today, or the figured chintz, and one of the two must be your wedding gown. Unless you wish to wear mine." She shook her head. "But I'm afraid it is sadly out of date, and of course the *Gazette* is quite ruthless about the polonaise these days...."

"We can cut it! We can simply detach the loops and re-hem it, so it hangs properly."

"And you may wear my new underskirt!" volunteered Lucy, in a grand gesture.

"The quilted one? Oh, yes, Mama, do say yes! Lucy's primrose satin would be so charming with your lovely green silk. Do say we may alter it!"

"But what about the rubies?" put in Meg.

"Oh, dear," sighed Susan.

All faces fell. Pale yellow and spring green simply did not seem right for the rubies.

"Well," said Susan, "I don't care. I shall just wear them anyway."

The rest of the plans for the wedding went smoothly. Susan insisted, and Courtney with considerable relief concurred, that it was to be a wedding of the very simplest, with only the immediate family to witness the ceremony, and a modest wedding breakfast to which only the very closest friends of the family were to be invited.

Accordingly, when the wedding party assembled at the outsize stone church which testified to the once-

considerable population of the small village, only the Earl and his sister, the vicar, and the five Whalley's were admitted through the vestry door. But Martha and Mary Jane, and Courtney's sober, silent valet were allowed to attend at the back of the church. And half of the village turned out, milling about the churchyard and lightheartedly encouraging the juveniles to peek in at the windows and see Sukey Whalley marry His Lordship.

All agreed that His Lordship cut a very fine figure, in a pearl grey suit with a waistcoat embroidered in silver thread. He stood very still before the altar, with quiet hands and unreadable eyes. He read his responses in a voice that neither rang out nor hesitated, and seemed almost devoid of emotion.

"For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer," said Susan. "In sickness and in health." And she wondered if his stripes still pained him very much.

Then suddenly it was over. The vicar said "You may kiss the bride," and Courtney did, and then they recessed down the aisle. The doors were flung open to the fine summer's day and the crowd of uninvited but not really unwelcome spectators. Somebody set up a cheer, and someone else kept it on, and all at once Courtney burst out laughing, bundled his bride into his coach, jumped up behind her, and gave the coachman the order to drive, leaving his sister to fend for herself. The horses set off at a gallop, and the newly married pair departed the church in fine style.

They didn't go far, however, but soon slowed to a walk, and drove to the Squire's house for the wedding breakfast. Courtney remained in high spirits, drinking his fair share of the champagne that had been carted in express from King's Lynn. Susan was in seventh heaven, and when it came time for their departure, she found that yet another wedding present awaited her.

It had been agreed that they would proceed easily towards London, and Courtney had expressed a wish to ride. Susan, disdaining to loll about in a coach if her husband was to be on horseback, insisted that she too would like to ride. Courtney had promised to procure her

a presentable hack. They were to follow Zoe in the coach, in case of inclement weather or excessive fatigue, and Gustaf, in the curricle, would precede them to arrange for accommodation along the way. It was to be a great adventure, Susan thought, and she was looking forward to it, but when she found that the pretty little roan she was to ride had not been hired, but had been purchased for her exclusively, her pleasure was doubled.

"She is so lovely!" exclaimed Susan, as they cantered along a smooth stretch of road between blooming hedgerows, not yet too tall to see beyond, into the spreading fields. "And you are so lovely! And the weather is so lovely! It is *such* a lovely *day*!"

She dropped the reins and threw her arms wide for emphasis, and Courtney laughed as she nearly toppled over backwards when the roan took a quick step forward off a sharp stone. Righting herself, Susan laughed too.

The fact that she was setting out on a new life, a life utterly beyond anything in her experience, did not impress itself firmly upon Susan until she found herself alone with the Earl in the dark, unfamiliar room at an inn they were to share that first night. Easy in his elegant blue-green damask dressing gown, his hair falling thick and loose to the base of his neck, in defiance of the fashion for nightcaps, he laughed at her timidity.

"*Now* you are shy!" He smiled ruefully. "Believe me, my dear, in my present state of health, I pose about as much threat to you as my aged uncle Alfred."

Susan tossed her head.

"It isn't you. It's my clothes; I feel so clumpish."

Courtney smiled, and sat down, with a glass of wine in his hand.

"I see your point. Earth-brown kerseymere is not precisely the pinnacle of *la mode*. Well, we'll change all that. And what is underneath this discouraging garment? A shapeless little nightdress suitable for a child of twelve, I dare swear."

Susan put off the brown robe.

"Well, no, not entirely dreadful, but not quite my taste in ladies' night-gowns, either."

"It belongs to my mother," said Susan.

"I should have guessed. Pretty and modest, with illogical little frills and furbelows. But you, I think, should wear only thinnest cambric, to show off your lovely young body, with lace ruffles round the hem, to call attention to your fine little feet."

Susan blushed, feeling a little like an animal being appraised for the fair.

Courtney laughed, tossed off his wine, and reached out his arms towards her from his chair. Almost immediately he cursed, and winced sharply.

"Damme, I've opened one of my wounds again. Father or no father, that fellow ought to be hanged. Now dammit, dammit, don't look at me like that. It was criminal assault, Susan!" He sighed. "But I shan't charge him, and well you know it, so you needn't give me those frightened-chick looks whenever I indulge in the harmless pleasure of imagining. Oh, God."

Wearily, he poured himself another glass of wine.

"You are tired," observed Susan. "Is it wise for you to be all day upon horseback, when you are still not in perfect health?"

"I dare not ride in the coach with Zoe; she'd know inside of an hour that I was uncomfortable leaning back against the cushions. My coach is finely sprung, but still, it is a coach and not a barge. And I enjoy riding. I find jouncing in a coach to be unbearably tedious. Of course, you are free to take to the carriage if you like."

"Oh, no," said Susan, "I'll go along with you."

He shrugged. "As you like. But you are right that we had better take it slower than we did today, for 'tis God's truth I am fagged half to death. Let's go to bed."

Susan obediently went and climbed in between the coarse but clean white sheets, underneath the light coverlet. The straw mattress crunched under her weight. Courtney threw himself down beside her, flat on his belly. He lay motionless, in an attitude of near exhaustion.

"My lord?" whispered Susan.

He made a receptive but not enthusiastic noise.

"I thought I should tell you . . . I think I shan't have a child. I mean . . ." She blushed in the darkness. "If I have got my courses, that makes it pretty sure, doesn't it?" She was very embarrassed, but she thought it only fair that he should know.

The discussion did not disconcert Courtney in the least. He had far too much experience with women to be squeamish.

"I think you could say that makes it pretty sure," he agreed. "In the normal way of things, at any rate." He turned his face towards her. "Here, kiss me, my dear. Kiss your husband good night."

As Susan pressed her lips to his cool ones, she knew that he was very much relieved by what she had told him. She, for her part, was a little disappointed.

"May I ask you one more question, my lord?"

"Yes."

"Shall I be called Lady Courtney?"

When he made a negative "hm-mm," Susan had a momentary shock. Would he refuse to acknowledge her?

"No such person as Lady Courtney," he said. "Lady Lakewood. Don't you even know that? God, you'll have a lot to learn. Lady Lakewood, or Lady Lakewood Courtney. When I am Rayne, you will be Lady Rayne. Susan Rayne."

"Not Susan Huntingdale?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Hell, I don't know. Convention."

"What am I to call you?"

"Anything you like." She could hear a hint of a smile in his voice, then he became more serious. "My name is Lakewood Lowndes Halsey Huntingdale. My family calls me Lee; my friends call me Hunter; my acquaintances call me Courtney. You may take your pick."

"What a lot of names for one person. Why do they call you Hunter? Are you fond of riding to hounds?"

She heard the smile again, in the dark, as he replied, "Not particularly."

I suppose it is only because of Huntingdale, she thought; they all seem to have nicknames like that. You see them in the newspaper.

She tried to remember if she had ever seen a reference to a social figure named Hunter, but she couldn't think of any. Many more questions were rattling around in her brain, but she knew Courtney was too tired to answer them. So she lay still and listened to the rhythm of his breathing become slow and gentle, and she knew he was asleep.

Well, she thought, "Lady Lakewood." That was rather nice.

# V

In the morning, time was found to visit the city of Cambridge. Once more, the carriages went on ahead, and the newly married pair made their way on horseback. It was a most unusual honeymoon.

Upon leaving the inn at the outskirts of the town, where they had spent the night, Susan found herself for the first time negotiating city traffic, and she had to divide her attention between the beauty of the buildings and the business of keeping the slightly skittish roan in hand as they passed over Magdalene Bridge.

"'Maudlin?'" echoed Susan. "Why is it called that? Is there something excessively sentimental about it?"

"I have always found Magdalene rather maudlin, myself," said Courtney, and chuckled to himself.

Susan frowned a little, uncomprehending, and almost came to grief in attempting to peer up and down the slow, green river as a cart rumbled by, taking up more than its share of the roadway. She concentrated on navigating for a few anxious minutes thereafter, until, turning into St. John's Street, the Earl reined in before the double-towered Tudor gatehouse of St. John's College, and dismounted. As he tethered his grey to the railing, Susan gawked happily at the sculpted goat-like creatures—"yales," Courtney called them—in the panel above the archway. Then he helped her down from the mare, and, with his habitual air of knowing exactly where he was going and having every right to go there, he ushered her through the gate, smiling faintly and tossing a coin to the gatekeeper, and into the First Court, turfed and cobbled round.

"I wonder which is the Master's Lodge," he murmured, directing a suspicious eye at a square section of construction distinguishable from the adjoining Chapel only by the shape of its windows.

"Do you know him?" asked Susan.

"The Master?" He shook his head. "Don't know a soul. Or rather, I'm sure I do, but I can't think of anyone offhand. Let's just have a look round on our own, shall we? I've never stopped here before."

With his same confident air, the Earl continued into the Second Court, pleasantly ringed by fine brickwork structures, in a style quite new to Susan, which she was told was Elizabethan. A second turreted gateway, much like the one on the street but less elaborate, led from the Second Court into the Third, cloistered and charming. From there, they proceeded by way of an anonymous door, which Susan would never have dared to try on her own, to the river. They found themselves standing on a pretty, classical bridge spanning the Cam.

Here they paused, loitering against the low, open balustrade, and Susan gazed her fill up and down, enchanted by the willow trees that bowed and swayed at the water's edge, and the boaters that lolled about in their frail-looking craft, punting desultorily.

They strolled for an hour or so in the "Backs," the broad lawns and avenues along the river, behind the College buildings. There was no one to enlighten them as to the names of the Colleges they saw, to point out buildings of note, or recite the names of famous Fellows. In their ignorance, they failed to visit King's Chapel, preferring to remain out of doors. But they were satisfied with their tour.

As they returned to King's Parade, by way of the Senate House and the Old Schools, Susan exclaimed, "What a wonderful setting for the thinking of great thoughts!"

Courtney raised his eyebrows.

"No one I know ever thought great thoughts at university. They had a damned good time, and contracted the pox, and got hellish into debt."

"P'raps you just don't know the right people!" replied Susan, with spirit.

He gave her a strange look.

"Perhaps I don't, at that."

"Did you ever go to university?"

"I planned to, at one time, but I never got round to it." He shrugged. "It isn't thought necessary, you know, except for younger sons looking for a career for themselves. And I never was really the bookish type. I daresay it's no loss. Probably I should have done nothing more than . . . have a damned good time, contract the pox, and get hellish into debt."

He smiled, but Susan had a feeling there was regret behind his light words. Not profound regret, but a little.

The rest of the journey passed agreeably enough, but there were no more sightseeing stops. Another stopover at a quiet but well-appointed inn, chosen by the reliable Gustaf, and at the close of the third day Susan found herself climbing into his lordship's crested carriage for the final stage into London. Zoe had already been conveyed into the city, behind swift post horses, and the coach returned to provide an appropriate entrance for the Earl into the beehive of the curious and the talkative that was London.

"We'll take a few days to get you presentable—wardrobe, and so on—and provide you with a lady's maid, and then we'll be off for Queen's Crown. Till then, you'll continue to be known as Miss Whalley, my dear. I don't want any rumors to reach home before I do. We'll put up at Grisé's."

Grisé's turned out to be a hotel, an imposing establishment on the fringes of St. James's, much frequented by well-bred gentlemen who committed their pecadilloes with style, grace, and decorum. It was not rumors of a new mistress that Courtney worried about. This was fortunate, for although there were no eyebrows raised or knowing smiles exchanged among the personnel at Grisé's, it would be common knowledge by morning that Courtney's latest was a lithe, buxom brunette with a hint of a North country burr to her speech. And the report

would be supported by stories of the shopping expeditions which were to follow in the next few days.

Shopping, Susan found, was a delightful but exhausting experience, especially with Lord Courtney, who was exacting and unflaggingly vigilant. He passed judgement on linens, night clothes, stockings, fichus, scarves reticules, gloves, ribbons. He gave approval of kid morning slippers, satin evening slippers, jean walking boots, fragile ruched mules, jeweled dancing shoes, finely crafted riding boots with red tassles. But his interest dissipated, Susan discovered, at the milliner's. In raptures, she tried hat upon hat, from lacy mobcaps to sturdy calaches for foul weather, delicate straw bonnets to velvet creations pleated and gathered and padded over outsize cardboard frames. Bored, Courtney became increasingly difficult to please, and in the end he disqualified himself.

"Take those two, and be done with it. You can come back with one of your lady friends another time. I've no taste in women's hats; they all seem so damn silly."

He felt quite differently about the dress shops. They were comfortable, and afforded periods of rest, during which he could retreat into his own thoughts, while Susan was borne off to a fitting room to be draped and properly pinned up.

It was during one of these moments of solitude, when he had wandered over to the shop windows and stood looking out, that a trimly dressed gentleman chanced by. The gentleman raised a hand in salute, glanced ironically at the shop's signboard, and prepared to pass on by. Courtney, however, grinned, and beckoned him to come in.

"Hunter, old boy." The young man came through the shop door with a hand outstretched. "Thought you were in Lincolnshire."

"I was, but I've spent a couple of weeks in the Fen Country, and now I'm on my way to Queen's Crown. Care to come along? Rayne will be thrilled to see his dear nevvy, I'm sure."

He grimaced dubiously. "Dear nevvy is in Rayne's

black books, I'm afraid. Has he forgiven me yet for taking that smashing new chestnut over the park wall and straining his hock?"

Courtney laughed. "I doubt it, but this will give you a chance to re-ingratiate yourself, Gerald."

The shop assistant appeared, and, taking his cousin by the arm, Courtney drew him into the private viewing room. Susan stood there in a striking evening dress of pink satin and point-de-Venise. She smiled hesitantly at the newcomer, and then pirouetted for the Earl.

"What do you think, Ger?"

"Of the girl, or the dress?" asked Gerald, in a low voice.

"The symbiosis," said Courtney, and Susan, whose ears were extraordinarily sharp, wondered what that was.

"Beautiful," said Gerald firmly. "Both. I no longer need ask what the hell you were up to in the Fen Country."

"You don't know the half of it, my dear boy," murmured Courtney. "Susan, come meet a friend of mine," he added, raising his voice.

Susan came, with the instinctive grace of a woman who knows she looks well. Gerald ogled her unabashedly, with a merry smile.

"My cousin, Gerald Huntingdale, presently next in line for the marquisate." His eyes sparkled with malicious amusement. "Gerald, meet Lady Lakewood."

A look of the blankest amazement erased all expression from Gerry's open, friendly young face. His mouth dropped open.

"Good God! Lee, you can't be serious?" he cried, and immediately flushed crimson at his own rudeness. He took Susan's hand and bowed over it, deeply and emphatically. When he could find his tongue again, he said, "Let me assure your ladyship, I meant no offense to you by my unconscionable outburst." Then, abandoning formality in an earnest attempt to correct a wrong impression, he added, "I am not surprised he has married *you*, but that he has married at all."

Cousin Gerry's eyes were as warmly brown as Courtney's were cool and impressive, and Susan smiled

into them, sympathetically anxious to relieve his embarrassment. She thought it was rather nasty of Courtney to subject him to such a shock. After a moment, Gerald managed to smile back.

"I am becoming less and less surprised," he said.

Courtney took her arm, and subtly nudged her back out onto the floor.

"Another turn about, my dear. Let's make up our minds about this gown. We are trying to decide, Gerald, between this and a similarly cut moss-green brocade."

"This is perfect," said Gerry. "Her ladyship's coloring is just right for pink. It blooms." He gave his cousin a wicked glance out of the corner of one eye. "She'll make every rose-clad blonde in the vicinity look insipid."

Courtney affected not to have heard this last remark.

"Yes, it does set off her complexion. We'll take it," he told the hovering assistant.

Gerald declined to remain longer, but, having reflected, he said he quite agreed it would be a good time for him to visit his uncle in Kent.

"And Aunt Claire," he added. "I hope Her L.a'ship is in health?"

Courtney could not refrain from pulling a face.

"I shouldn't worry about her, Ger; worry about *me*. I haven't told them yet. No one knows but you and Zo. God knows what sort of fireworks we're in for."

"Yes, indeed," said Gerald, "I have most definitely reconsidered. I shall come to Queen's Crown with you." He grinned. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

He left, and shortly thereafter the Earl and Susan concluded their business. Courtney moved that the shopping expedition be abandoned for the day, but Susan, rather hesitantly, said she had one more thing she would like to do.

Courtney sighed.

"Very well. Where to?"

"If you don't mind," said Susan, "I'd like to go on my own."

Far from being displeased, the Earl seemed agreeably surprised.

"Certainly, my dear. Shall I look in at my house in Grosvenor Square, which should not take above half an hour, or shall I stop at White's, which could well involve me for a couple of hours?"

"Oh, I shan't need more than half an hour."

Nodding, Courtney reached into his pocket, and extracted a purse, which he proferred without comment. Susan took it. Then the Earl climbed out of the carriage and sauntered off, with the air of a man not at all sorry to be left to his own devices for a while.

Susan, withdrawing from her own pocket the little box that contained her ruby wedding ring, raised the lid and read, "Schwarz and Van der Hout, Jewelers. Bond Street, London." Through the speaking tube, she gave that name to the coachman as her destination.

When the coach pulled up, she alighted and, having ascertained from the discreet gilt lettering on the door that this was the shop she sought, she went inside. A neatly dressed gentleman in black held the door for her, and another neatly dressed gentleman in black came forward to ask, in a tone of moderate cordiality, if he could be of service.

"I should like," said Susan, in a tone which she imagined mimicked Lady Zoe's pleasant-natured superiority, "to purchase a gift for a gentleman. I had in mind a ring."

"A diamond, perhaps, madam?" suggested the gentleman in black.

"No, he has a diamond. I want something unusual. Perhaps a...an emerald." Susan didn't know much about jewels, but she knew that emeralds were among the most precious, and she had no intention of getting anything but the finest. She had been privately mortified by her lack of a dowry, or any suitable wedding gift to rival her own rubies, and had vowed that she would purchase one at the first opportunity.

"Certainly, madam," said the gentleman in black. "Something in an emerald, for a man's ring."

He offered her a seat, which she took, though she would have preferred to remain standing, in order to

avoid being loomed over by these unnerving gentlemen in black. One gentleman held her chair while she sat, and another retired to fetch a tray of items for her inspection. As this latter gentleman walked away, he cast an immeasurably discreet glance out into the street, noted the crest on the carriage, and, with an immeasurably discreet word to another gentleman in black, returned to Susan, who examined each piece of jewelry with great care, picking it up, weighing it in her hand, and holding it up to the light critically. With regret, she dismissed the idea of choosing an unset stone, for she wanted the ring in a hurry, and concentrated on the few finished pieces.

As she contemplated, an unseen little drama was being enacted in a back room. The third gentleman in black was standing respectfully beside the desk while yet another gentleman in black, this one substantially older and with the distinct air of an Important Personage, was thumbing impatiently through a book much illustrated with lions couchant and unicorns rampant.

"A horse, you say, Coker? A galloping horse?"

"Yes, sir. A flying gallop, Mr. Schwarz."

Mr. Schwarz continued thumbing.

"On a ground of..?"

"No ground, sir, just the black horse, in a gilt ring."

"I know that one, dammit; I know that crest! Of course!" cried Mr. Schwarz, slapping the flat of his hand on the page which told him just as he remembered for himself. "Huntingdale. Lord Rayne. Good God, it's not the Lady Zoe, you nincompoop?"

"Certainly not!" intoned Coker, standing up very straight. "It is a Young Person I have not seen before. But I should not, myself, judge her to be of the Quality, Mr. Schwarz. That is why I felt it would be appropriate to refer the matter to you."

Mr. Schwarz scratched his head, and stood up.

"Quite right, I'm sure, Coker," he said, in a mildly conciliatory manner. "I'll go see to it."

"Oh," Susan was saying, crestfallen, as Mr. Schwarz materialized at her side. "So much as that? Well, I don't know, exactly, what I have got here..." Her voice trailed

off, and she poured out of the purse Courtney had given her a number of golden guineas. There were not nearly enough to pay for the ring she had chosen, but neither were there so few as to make her contemptible in the eyes of Mr. Schwarz.

He introduced himself, and Susan, in turn, introduced herself, as Miss Whalley.

"I know my name doesn't mean anything to you," she went on, "but perhaps if I gave you a note of hand for Mr. White, of Lincoln's Inn?"

Mr. Schwarz assured her that if Mr. White could vouch for her credit, he would be more than happy to accommodate her in any way he could.

"Well," said Susan, pleased with herself, "that's settled! I'll dash off a note to Mr. White, and once you have arranged it all with him, perhaps you can have the ring sent round to Grisé's Hotel, in Piccadilly."

Mr. Schwarz looked both enlightened and slightly disquieted by the mention of Grisé's, but agreed to accept the note for Mr. White. Exhilarated by her success, Susan smiled happily, and left the shop. In her new confidence, she ordered the coachman to drive her round Grosvenor Square, wondering which one was Courtney's house, and then round Berkeley Square, and then, having allowed the time to slip away from her, made all haste back to Bond Street, where the Earl had been waiting on the street corner for fully half an hour. In a state of crackling irritation, he ordered the coachman to take Madame wherever she wished to go, and then, without saying a word to Susan, he turned on heel and vanished in the direction of White's Chocolate House, St. James.

For several minutes Susan sat in the carriage, shrinking back against the soft mustard-colored cushions and biting her lip in embarrassment and agitation. Then the excitement of being in London overcame the distress of having vexed his lordship, and she leaned forward to order the coachman round Hyde Park. All her life she had read about Hyde Park, and now she actually had a chance to see it! Without realizing, she stumbled upon the parade of fashionable equipages touring the Ring, as they did

each afternoon shortly after four o'clock. At the height of the Season, she would have seen many more carriages, and riders, and even promenaders, but the number she did see was enough to keep the Squire's daughter hanging out the window, eyes alight. There were large, solid coaches like her own, pulled by four horses, with a coachman on the box and a footman or two up behind, but these generally belonged to the elderly, who valued comfort over style, and they were few. Then there were curricles, like the Earl's dashing maroon one, driven by young men who were not always handsome in themselves, but invariably handsome in their clothes and their accoutrements. And one curricle, Susan noted with envy, was driven by a young woman, smartly turned out in a hat with a long blue feather; and there was another curricle with its pair of horses in tandem, which looked to Susan like an awkward arrangement, and difficult to control. There was a phaeton or two, a modern vehicle Susan had only seen in the magazines she devoured, and one very avant-garde high-perch phaeton, which Susan had never even seen a picture of. The driver sat on a small box very high above the ground, over absurdly large wheels, and Susan was convinced there was more show than engineering effectiveness in that particular example of "progress."

One thing that never occurred to Susan, though it occurred to the coachman, who was rather smugly amused, was that all the time she was staring, she was herself being stared at. And if Mr. Schwarz had had to look up the Huntingdale crest, there were plenty of interested socialites in the park that day who had no such trouble; they identified Courtney's carriage immediately. By the time Susan departed the park, much pleased with her afternoon's discoveries, the grandmother in the barouche was putting two and two together, the young man driving tandem was smiling to himself, the girl with the blue feather was mentally composing a letter to her mama, and the young fop was drawling from the heights of his perch-phaeton, "Not his usual style, not at all; but

there she was, quite brazen." But Susan was oblivious. She had had a wonderful time.

She returned to the hotel around six o'clock. Lord Courtney had not returned, but Susan found waiting for her one Nancy Carson, who had been screened by Gustaf from a number of recommended applicants as a possible abigail for Lady Lakewood. Nancy Carson had of course not been told that it was Lady Lakewood, but she had been reassured that the lady's residence at Grisé's Hotel was not to be taken as unduly significant. Carson, who was not really in a position to refuse a job, was relieved. She was even more relieved when she made the acquaintance of her future employer. They hit it off immediately, for Carson was a lively young person, of cheerful disposition, who did not rate her own consequence by the self-consequence of her mistress. Susan felt comfortable with her, and, trusting in the valet's assessment of her competence, hired her straightaway.

Straightaway meant that Nancy (Susan balked at "Carson," as the custom was) was pressed into service that very evening, for Susan wished to look her best. She had determined to make up for the inconvenience she had caused his lordship by providing for him a perfectly scintillating evening. Together, she and Nancy chose a dress from those which had been delivered during the afternoon, and Susan sat down to put her new maid's skill at hairdressing to the test. Meantime, she ordered dinner, including every exotic dish she had ever heard of, and some she hadn't, to be served in the drawing room of Courtney's suite as soon as he arrived. And while this was going on, a messenger arrived from Mr. Schwarz, with the emerald ring. Susan was relieved to know all had gone well with White, for in truth she had not been so sure as she wished the jeweler to think that Courtney's attorney would vouch for her.

By half-past seven, Susan was devastatingly arrayed in a new dress of glazed cotton embroidered with tiny violets over a pale lavender underskirt, her hair elegantly but naturally dressed with a few locks falling over one

shoulder, her features accented by just a touch of paint, which made her feel sophisticated but did not exceed the limits of good taste. Courtney had still not appeared. Susan sat down to await him. And sat, and sat, and sat, reading dull newspapers till her head began to nod, and then, finally, she abandoned her fine coiffure to its fate, and curled up in her chair and went to sleep.

"'... Innocent sleep, that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care...'"

The soft, ironic voice penetrated her consciousness only slowly. Rubbing her eyes like a child, she struggled to sit up, and blinked at the figure that stood over her. It was that of a pale, thin man with a black velvet patch just above the corner of his mouth, wearing a long-queued silvery pigeon-wing periwig and a blue satin coat that shimmered with silver lace and sapphire buttons.

"Are you going to a party?" asked Susan.

Courtney laughed.

"I've been. I've been at Court. I was caught up in the tide this afternoon, when the Prince commanded a tableful of us to accompany him to some diplomatic function. It was deadly."

He went to the sideboard and filled a glass with burgundy. Susan thought he did not look as though it had been deadly; he looked as though he had been thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Wine?"

She shook her head.

He shrugged, raised his glass to her, and downed the contents at a draught. He refilled the glass.

"Are you drunk?" said Susan.

He laughed again. "Hardly. Hungry, though. They said you had ordered dinner. I told them to get on with it."

As if in corroboration, there came a knock at the door and a procession of waiters began. First came a table, linens, and utensils, then a dozen or so dishes ranging from broiled eel with ham sauce and roast goose with glacéed chestnuts to asparagus hollandaise, broccoli provençale, pomegranates and apricot souffle. Courtney politely concealed his astonishment until the last of the

waiters had gone, leaving a spun-sugar confection entitled "L'Alouette En Cage," and then he began to laugh as if he would never stop.

"What a dinner!" He pulled a kumquat out of his pocket and yelled for Gustaf. When the valet appeared, he said, "Find out what the hell this is and have a few pounds of 'em sent round to Carlton House. Anonymously. Say it's a secret Chinese aphrodisiac. Prinny will love it!"

"Are you friends with the Prince of Wales?" asked Susan.

"Not one of his set, really, but we get on. Of course. Brandy? Cordial, then? Oh, for God's sake." He poured her some cordial. "Drink it, my dear. You'll have to learn."

Reluctantly, Susan tasted it. It was rather good, sweet and syrupy, without much bite. By the time she finished it, she had summoned the courage to present her gift.

"A wedding present," she said, pushing the box across the table.

"How charming," said Courtney. He opened the box. "God! Where did you get this?"

"From a reputable jeweler," said Susan stiffly.

Courtney held it up to the light of the candelabrum on the table.

"How in hell did you pay for it? They never gave you credit!"

Susan scowled. "Mr. White vouched for me. I intend to pay for it out of my allowance."

"God save us, you never told..?"

"Of course not!" She sprang to her feet, flushed with disappointment. "I must say I don't think you are very polite, to go on and on about the money, with never a thank you or a kind word! If you don't like it, I'm sure I can take it back."

He gave her a heavy-lidded look.

"How very mortifyingly right you are. Thank you, my dear. It is a lovely piece, and suits me marvelous well. You have a nice eye."

Only slightly mollified, Susan gave him no more than the ghost of a smile. He continued to regard her languidly,

reflecting that if she were not so exhaustingly innocent, he would invite her to bed. But he was in no mood to take pains; what he needed was a woman of skill and experience. He thought of Heather Clarke, and the languor in his eyes intensified. It occurred to Susan that he had taken a great deal of wine.

"We set out tomorrow for Queen's Crown by nine," he said. "Perhaps you'd best go to bed now."

As she turned to leave the room, Susan saw him heft the emerald ring thoughtfully in his hand, and then slip it on his finger.

# *VI*

In the morning, promptly at nine, Susan was waiting in the drawing room, dressed for travel in a sensible dun-colored gabardine. Her bags were packed, with as much of the previous day's purchases as had arrived, and the rest was to follow. Nancy had proved most efficient.

It was a quarter past nine when the door to his lordship's bedroom opened, and he appeared, looking quite another person than the laughing, loquacious sophisticate of the previous night. He was dressed entirely in black, except for his shirt and surprisingly elaborate lace neckcloth. His face was grim; his discourse was brusque. With barely a greeting, he motioned Susan out of the door and downstairs, where they met Gerald on his way up, and all three of them proceeded to the traveling coach, which was waiting at the front door of the hotel.

He's feeling rather the worse for all that wine, thought Susan.

He's nervous of facing his father, thought Gerald.

Both of them were partly right. The carriage set out for Kent with all passengers sitting in silence.

At their destination, some thirty miles down the Dover road, things were far from silent. Three people were gathered in a large paneled room, where the sun streamed in to light up the fine collection of maps of Europe and the world that adorned the walls. But no one was looking at them.

"By all that's holy," roared the tall, craggy man who paced the fine French carpet, "by the blood and bones of Our Lord Jesus Christ, this had better be a joke!"

He brandished a sheet of cream-colored vellum, and

glared at the Lady Zoe, who sipped at a glass of lemonade.

"Rayne, you sound absurdly piratical," commented the pale, distinguished woman who sat near the window, shifting her needlepoint to catch the light.

"Madam, hold your tongue. If you have nothing to contribute, you may go away."

"I have no intention of going away," replied Lady Rayne. "This concerns me every bit as much as it concerns you."

"Zoe, is it true? Is this... this infamy an actual fact?"

"I'm afraid so, Papa. I was there myself."

"Hell and the devil! You have the unmitigated gall to tell me, without a blush or a quaver, that you were a party to this... this..." Unable to come up with a satisfactory word, Lord Rayne uttered an obscenity that caused his wife to close her cold blue eyes briefly, but not to miss a stitch.

Warming to his subject, the Marquess stamped about the room, hurling imprecations at his absent son. From the quickness of the blood that ebbed and flowed in his cheeks, the vigorousness of his gestures, the fluency of his tongue, it could readily be surmised that this was a man of passion, but Zoe, who had seen her father in a temper more times than she could count, had never seen him in a passion like this before. She was alarmed. This was no display of pyrotechnics; this was real rage, and bitter disappointment.

Finally, having given vent to the immediacy of his emotions, Lord Rayne sank into a chair, and dropped his head in his hands.

"How could he do this? How could he do this to me? I vow, I have never been so shocked and pained in all my life." He heaved a sigh. "Well, daughter, tell us what she is like, this irresistible Circe."

Zoe deposited her lemonade on the gaming table beside her.

"Well, Papa, a Circe is exactly what she is not. When Lee wrote to me that he was to be married, and asked that I send him a gift to give his bride—well, as you did, I assumed he must be playing some sort of joke on me,

setting up some sort of hoax, though that seemed most unlike him. But then I checked with White, and it seemed White had the same story, so then I imagined—well, I rather imagined he had gone out of his mind, or was in some sort of trouble, or... who knows? At any rate, I went with White, to this tiny village in the Isle of Ely, and there was Courtney, seeming perfectly sane, and perfectly determined to marry this girl."

"That is sane?" murmured Rayne, shaking his head.

Zoe shrugged. "She is very pretty, of course, and very sweet. And of course she dotes on him."

"If I had a year of life for every sweet, pretty girl who has at one time or another doted on my son, I should live forever," said Rayne.

Lady Rayne chose another shade of silk, and needlepointed in silence.

"Well, yes," said Zoe. "That's what makes it so odd. I really can't see what makes her so different. But he was determined."

"Petty landowner's daughter, you say?"

"Yes. Prosperous enough, but certainly not the sort of family..."

"Certainly not," said Lady Rayne.

"But not impossible, Mother. She hasn't got rough, red hands, or a grating accent. She's unpolished, but she has a deal of spontaneous charm. I daresay her manners are no worse than many a girl of excellent family brought up in the country."

"But she is *not* a girl of excellent family," observed Her La'ship.

Zoe had no reply to that.

The sun filtered through the tall windows, and soft summer morning sounds hummed and rustled in the trees outside. Beyond, the land stretched, green and beneficent, to a blue horizon.

"Well," said Zoe finally, "she's not *awful*."

Lady Rayne looked up from her canvas, and fixed her large blue eyes on her husband.

"Is that what you aspire to as the future of this family? An absence of awfulness?"

Rayne frowned heavily.

"What would you suggest, Claire?"

"What's done, my lord, can generally be undone."

"Hm," said Rayne.

Zoe looked from one to the other, but neither of them looked at her. They were exchanging a glance which seemed to express more than Zoe could quite fathom. She resolved to have a word with her brother as soon as he might arrive.

In the event, though, she was not on hand when he arrived. No one was. When the crested traveling coach drew up under the square brick tower that marked the main entrance to Queen's Crown, there was a singular lack of activity. When the coachman raised a shout, a lone boy materialized to let down the carriage steps. Courtney looked at Gerald, Gerald looked at Courtney, and they both looked round for the footmen, and the dogs. There was no one but the boy, who went to help the coachman with the horses.

The Earl shrugged lightly, then handed Susan down from the coach. As he did so, the massive wooden door under the clock tower swung open to reveal an almost equally massive woman.

"Mrs. Q," said Courtney, in greeting. They passed through the door into a square vestibule with a black and white marble floor. "Where is everybody?"

Mrs. Quarles drew herself up into a monumental pose expressive of stony disapproval.

"In the Lower Garden, milord. That's where they are, and Heaven help 'em all."

"Oh, my lord! Gerry," he called to his cousin, who was following, still gazing about him in perplexity, "it's Thursday, for God's sake. We'd forgotten."

Gerry's face broke into a smile. "Of course!"

Susan wondered what on earth it was about Thursday that explained the desertion of the grounds, but no one saw fit to enlighten her.

"Mrs. Q., this is Miss Whalley. You've been told where to put her?"

Mrs. Quarles bobbed her head heavily. "Yes, milord. The Red Room."

He raised an eyebrow. "Have we a large company?"

"A few, sir. Eight or nine. Miss Bella is in the Essex Room, next door to the Red."

Courtney's lip twitched, and annoyance vied with amusement in his eyes.

"How thoughtful of Her La'ship to provide Miss Whalley with company. Well, take her along then."

As Susan tripped behind Mrs. Quarles, trying to ignore the knot in the pit of her stomach, she found herself in a building as classical inside as it was Tudor outside. She passed through a very long room, and then a shorter one, both abounding in gleaming parquet, spotless mouldings and gilded stucco, tall many-paneled windows with opulent draperies. Above her head were painted ceilings she dared only glance at, for fear of becoming lost in their mythological worlds. The furniture was not abundant, but each piece made her want to stop and touch it. The warm, dark wood glowed; the occasional brass fittings shone; the elegant upholstery begged to be caressed. It was all Susan could do to force herself along steadily behind Mrs. Quarles, through the reception rooms and through a far door, and up a flight of stone steps.

Upstairs, to Susan's disappointment, they turned not into the main part of the house, but into a long, broad corridor, that lined the house like a cloister around the square inner courtyard. Through the windows, a fountain could be seen playing in the middle of a circular bed of white roses, and, as Susan peeked out, a servant was crossing with a pile of folded white linens in her arms. To her other side, as she walked, Susan caught occasional glimpses of room after room. All bore signs of being occupied: in one there would be a maid puttering about; in another, a dressing gown would be flung casually over a chair; in yet another, a shaving kit would be set out on a washstand.

At last, at quite the opposite side of the house from the

entrance, Mrs. Quarles pushed open a polished walnut door and stood back for Susan to pass. Eyes shining with excitement, Susan did, and then stood still to take stock of her room. It was square and, paradoxically, not red at all; Susan supposed it had been at one time. But now it was hung with pale blue wallpaper above walnut wainscotting. There was a plain but pretty walnut wardrobe and a washstand set with delicate porcelain painted in red and blue, red poppies and little blue birds. There was a blue Turkey carpet on the floor, and an embroidered white coverlet on the short, fat Jacobean bed hung with matching curtains. Susan was charmed. When she ran to the window, she could see long sloping lawns and tall trees, and between them the crystalline sparkle of a pond. As she watched, a pair of deer wandered out of the trees, and stood cropping the grass just at the edge of the shadows. It seemed to Susan she had never seen anything so lovely.

Next moment, there was a knock at the door, and Nancy appeared, closely followed by a chambermaid bearing a basin of water, and the same hapless boy who had met the carriage, struggling under the weight of a single piece of Susan's luggage. Susan hoped it was the one she needed. While Nancy located a fresh dress for her, she washed up, and very soon was contemplating her image in the long mirror that stood by the washstand. She saw nothing but an insignificant, juvenile nose, and a curl which insisted on popping out over her ear in a ridiculous way. She did not see an attractive young girl in a pale yellow morning dress of fine fabric and flattering design; she did wonder if the dress was not cut a little too tight, and if her fichu was not perhaps sheerer than it should be. When she attempted to rearrange it, however, it bunched in the middle and gapped in the back, and had to be redone completely. So she decided it really was too bad of Courtney to buy her a dress which made her look fat and untidy, and if his parents were disgusted with her it certainly wouldn't be *her* fault. And when Nancy told her she looked beautiful, Susan sniffed and said she despised

humbug. Nancy, who understood perfectly, did not take offense.

Just as she decided she would have to change clothes altogether, his lordship's valet came to the door and informed Susan that Lord Courtney and Mr. Huntingdale were waiting for her below. He also suggested that, as they would be proceeding into the garden, she might wish to put on her hat, a tactful hint for which she was duly grateful. When she had done as he suggested, Gustaf led her down the hallway, which he called the Square Corridor, to another flight of steps in a corner of the house diametrically opposite that which she had come up. Here, however, the ancient stone stair had been replaced by a wooden one, which led to a pleasant library.

Courtney looked up as she entered. There was a tense crease between his brows, which he seemed to relax with an effort. He took Susan's arm and told her she looked charming.

"Now then, Gerry, no larking about. We want no tongues wagging."

"Of course not, dear boy," replied Gerald.

"This is a lovely house," said Susan, trying to be nonchalant. "How old is it?"

"1539. The basic structure, that is." They began to walk.

"Oh, yes. Tudor—like St. John's College. I remember the towers, and the brick, and the chimneys."

Courtney smiled.

"And the arrangement round a central court. Well, the way it was in those days, all the rooms were connected round the square, which was not a bad idea at all, so far as heating and lighting, and so on, but it made for a severe lack of privacy. Each room, you see, had to be more or less a public thoroughfare to the next. So my grandfather, about 1710, hit upon the scheme of the Square Corridor. The interior had been quite extensively remodeled inside already, in consultation with Inigo Jones, and when the Square Corridor was put in, the opportunity was taken to put in a couple of new stairways (there's one at each

corner of the square, you realize), and Hawksmoor was brought in to oversee that and do the stuccoed ceilings. Like this one," he added, and Susan craned her neck to look at the gilded rosettes and deep-relief mouldings set in spare geometrical patterns.

"How knowledgeable you are," remarked Gerald. "I didn't know you were interested in architecture."

"I am interested," said Courtney, "in Queen's Crown."

They emerged onto a broad terrace, set about with stone benches and several large urns filled with geraniums. At the bottom of a wide flight of shallow stairs was an elaborate parterre. A lone ginger cat sat between trimmed boxwood hedges, washing its face.

"Not a soul about. They're all down in the Lower Garden, I suppose," said Gerry, and they set off along white-graveled walkways through the parterre, past formal beds of roses, and down a sloping path which meandered through a wood of elms and oak-trees, and then opened abruptly onto a wide, flat lawn.

On this lawn, a motley collection of men were either dashing about madly or standing incongruously still, with their hands on their hips. A number of spectators, grouped to one side, were jumping up and down and shouting either encouragement or disparagement, depending upon their sympathies. At a far corner, in the shade of two massive spreading cedars, sat another group of people, in light chairs around small tables; these paid no attention whatsoever to the disreputable crew of jumpers and shouters and dashers about.

"But... it's a cricket match!" cried Susan.

"Of course," said Courtney. "Every second Thursday. Queen's Crown against the village."

"I wonder who's winning?" said Gerald. "Good shot!" he added, in a howl, as the batsman gave the ball a terrific whack and everyone began to run.

"*Run*, sir!" yelled Courtney.

The man chasing the ball caught it, and threw it like lightning to the wicketkeeper and everything stopped.

"Let me off, now, Trapper," he called to his captain. "Take on one of the noisy scamps who've just arrived."

"No substitutions except by reason of injury," intoned Trapper solemnly.

"For shame!" cried Courtney. "Let him off—a man of his age!"

"What did he say? *What* did he say?"

"Sorry, milord," said Trapper, with a grin. "Couldn't hear 'im. Bad ear on this side, y'know, milord."

"Good God," Lord Rayne went on, "somebody run lock up the stables. It's Gerald!"

By this time he had approached closely enough for Susan to see that he was a lean, powerful-looking man of about fifty, whose face bore a strong resemblance to Courtney's, except for an extravagance of sharp, pointed nose. In a moment that sharp nose was being pointed at her.

"My father," murmured Hunter. "Sir, this is Susan."

"Madam," said Lord Rayne. He bowed.

Susan wondered how a man could contrive to be imposing in torn stockings, stained breeches and a crumpled shirt open halfway down his chest, how he could project an aura of elegance when his hair was matted and straggling and he was sweating like a horse. But he did.

"My lord marquess," she stammered.

Lord Rayne turned to his nephew, shook his hand, and assured him that the chestnut had returned to perfect health.

"In spite of your best efforts." He then turned to his son, whom he touched lightly on the shoulder, and then kissed briefly on the mouth. Susan's eyes widened, but Gerry seemed to think nothing of this greeting between father and son.

"So the prodigal returns. Too bad you didn't come earlier; we could have used you on the team. We're bein' beat."

"I forgot it was Thursday, sir," said Courtney with a smile.

"Forgetful?" Rayne laughed coolly, and there was a disconcerting edge to his voice as he said, "A man of your age?"

He sketched a bow for Susan, and walked back to his game. Courtney was no longer smiling. He knew that in spite of appearances, he was in for a bad time.

The three newcomers continued around the playing field towards the group of ladies who were sitting in the shade playing cards. As they walked, a girl detached herself from the knot of spectators and skipped over to intercept them.

"The Maccaroni set has arrived," she teased them. "Just too late to take part in the scuffle."

"Isabel, your very humble," said Courtney, making a leg.

"Bella, your abject," agreed Gerald, also making a leg.

Isabel laughed. "Maccaronis, indeed!"

She was a tall, blonde girl, a year or two older than Susan. Her pale greenish eyes danced and her long, dark lashes fluttered as she gazed mockingly at the two young men. Susan felt an uneasy twinge.

Recalling himself, Courtney made the introductions.

"Oh, yes," said Isabel. "Miss Whalley, who is to have the room next to mine."

"I rather fancy," said Courtney drily, "you are to protect her from my lecherous advances."

"I am just the one to do it! For don't I know all your tricks?" she smiled, and chucked him under the chin, which to Susan seemed almost a form of lèse majesté, but Courtney didn't seem to mind.

Isabel took Susan's arm, and tucked it confidentially under her own.

"This is a wicked man, this Hunter. A dreadful creature, the sort your mother always warned you about. His has one of the worst reputations in Town, and every word of it is true!"

"Bella, you flatter me," said Courtney.

"Forewarned is forearmed, my love," said Isabel, and Susan felt intensely awkward. Gerald seemed perilously close to a fit of laughter.

Courtney seemed abstracted, and grew increasingly more so as they continued round the cricket field, speaking to a few people here and there. Susan tried to

follow the cheerful banter between Isabel, who seemed to be a very close family friend, and Gerald, but her nervousness had increased to the point of paralysis by the time she was introduced to Lady Rayne. Very tall, very thin, and modishly pale, the Marchioness reposed swan-like in an armchair at a table of whist. Everything about her seemed wintry, from the ice-blue silk of her dress to the translucence of her long, delicate neck and the spectacular crown of snow-white hair which owed nothing to powder. Her manner was glacial. She bestowed upon Susan a frozen quarter of a smile, extended two cold fingers, and said, "Delighted, Miss Whalley." Susan repressed an urge to examine her own fingers for frostbite where they had touched her mother-in-law's.

For the rest of the cricket match, Susan circulated, being sized up by everyone and sidestepping or parrying questions as best she could, seconded admirably by Courtney, and later by his sister, who gave up her seat at the whist table to join them. Susan had just begun to feel a little less uncomfortable when, to her chagrin, the match ended, and Lord Rayne bore his son off towards the house. Some moments later, Lady Rayne languidly detached herself from the card players and followed. Shortly thereafter, Zoe corraled Gerald, neatly passed Susan off on him, and slipped indoors herself. Susan felt quite ill.

"Well, really," said a large lady in a damask dress of bilious green, "I can't see how Rayne allows it. It... it smacks of republicanism!"

"Nonsense, Guinevere," broke in a red-faced gentleman with the look of an avid sportsman. "There is nothing of the Republican about Rayne!"

"Such an undignified game," went on the bilious lady, in a complaining voice. "Now, I can see an hour of pall mall now and then, but this cricket! And for the head groom to captain the team—MacLeith, you must admit that's going a bit far."

"Pall mall!" said Gerald, to Isabel and Susan. "A capital notion. Shall we play?"

The two young ladies agreed, and Mr. MacLeith decided to join them. The foursome made its way back up through the parterre to a narrow grassed alley laid out for the game. As they did so, they passed directly under the windows of the Map Room, where Lord Rayne and his family were gathered. Courtney was standing by the chimney piece, looking rebellious. Rayne was sitting on a corner of his writing table, looking annoyed. Zoe was looking mildly apprehensive. Lady Rayne, as usual, was looking composed and cool.

"Dammit, I am not recalcitrant," insisted Courtney. "I merely say I do not see what is to be gained by delaying. I do not wish to continue this masquerade a moment longer than necessary."

"It seems to me," put in his mother, "that we are not all of us agreed as to just what *is* necessary."

Lord Rayne stood up. "What is *not* necessary is this invasion of a private conversation between myself and my son by a gaggle of gossiping females." Zoe, who had not uttered a word, looked indignant. "Ladies, we are leaving you. Goodbye."

"Rayne," said his wife pleasantly, "sometimes you are quite detestable."

"I know," he replied, taking Courtney's arm and pushing him towards the door. "It is one of my most endearing qualities."

Together, the two men left the house. Rayne, looking rather more civilized for a bath and a change of clothes, clasped his hands behind his back, and said nothing. Courtney, looking tired and edgy, thrust his hands in his pockets, and said nothing. They sauntered past waxy-leaved banks of rhododendrons, beyond the parterre, and found themselves in sight of the pall mall. They paused to watch, half hidden in a small pine grove. Courtney leaned against a tree trunk, folding his arms in order to keep from pulling at his fingernails.

"So," said Rayne.

"Yes, sir," said Courtney.

Lord Rayne's eyes flickered across the lawn. Susan had just gained the right to knock Gerald off the field, and

Isabel was urging her to send him into the pond. Susan stood, undecided, leaning lightly on her mallet. She looked back and forth between her companions, while the one pleaded for mercy and the other advocated stringency. In the end, she opted for female solidarity, and sent the orange ball sailing. The two girls laughed, and Gerry pantomined despair.

"Well, boy," said Rayne. "What do you have to say?"

Courtney shifted his weight on his feet, and stared at the line of trees on the horizon.

"I had to marry her, sir. Personal reasons."

"Personal reasons? What the hell does that mean?"

"It means personal. I just have to ask you to accept that they were good reasons."

"Oh, come now." Rayne didn't believe his ears. "I don't give a damn about your personal life; you know that. I don't care how you take your pleasure, or with whom. But marriage—that's another matter entirely. If you take it into your head to marry a young woman who has nothing but her pretty face to recommend her, then I think I certainly have a right to know why. I begin," he went on, his voice hardening, "to wonder if you have taken leave of your senses. I begin to wonder . . ." Now the soft voice was like steel. ". . . if you are fit for your exalted station in life."

Courtney's face was deathly pale, and he trembled slightly.

"Do you threaten to disinherit me?"

"I do not threaten. I merely inform you that my confidence is shaken. If you can explain to me why it should not be shaken, I beg you will do so."

The young man's eyes focussed on the scene before him, the twilight slipping across the meadow, chasing the soft red afterglow of the sunset; the long shadows of the great house, with its solid contours and its multitude of chimneys, reaching out like fingers across the land. He loved it. His whole reason for being was tied to that house, to that land, to the cold, angry man who stood beside him.

"If you do not believe in me," he said at last, "then you must disown me."

Then he walked away, making for the house and a

room with a door and a lock. Two spaniels romped up as they saw him coming, but, ignored, they soon bounded away.

Their movement, however, had alerted Susan, who watched Courtney disappear inside a small door, and then turned to see Lord Rayne bearing down upon the pall mall. She bungled her last shot rather badly. Rayne approached, stopped, conversed casually with MacLeith for a moment, then neatly cut Susan out of the group and spirited her away in a cloud of small talk. Susan braced herself for the attack.

It never came. The small talk continued, polite, impersonal, even frivolous. Susan dredged up every precept of good conversation that had ever been stuffed with difficulty into her head by well-meaning governesses, relatives, and friends, and made as good an account of herself as she could. Finally, Lord Rayne released her.

"This," he said, gesturing lightly, "is the Dutch Room." It was a well-appointed chamber with western-oriented windows, hung with what appeared to be Rubenses and Rembrandts. "The dining room is just beyond. Generally we keep country hours, but on cricket days we dine late. Half-past eight."

"Thank you for telling me, my lord. You are most considerate."

"Don't think it's for you, my dear. It's for us," he said, and left her abruptly.

Susan made her way back to her room as best she could, only getting completely lost once.

In the front of the house, Zoe slipped quietly through the small closet that separated her bedroom from her brother's. She tapped at the closed door. When there was no response, she called out. When there was still no response, she pushed the heavy door open. Courtney sat in the window, in his white shirt and black breeches, with a vacant look on his face.

"Lee, darling, are you quite well?"

He gave her a look.

"Was it very bad, then, with Rayne?"

"Zo," he said, "go away."

In a rare show of agitation, Zoe twisted a raven curl about her forefinger.

"It was bad. I am sorry. I meant to warn you, but there hasn't been a moment to see you alone till now."

"Zoe," he cried, "go away!"

She retreated. Courtney disengaged himself from the windowseat, crossed the room to pour out a tumblerful of brandy, and then returned to the window. He perched with one foot on the sill, one foot on the floor, crumpling the wine satin-damask draperies between his back and the wall. After a while, there came a knock on the large door that opened onto the Square Corridor. Courtney ignored it. A few moments later, the closet door opened; Rayne came in by way of Zoe's chambers. He was in his dressing gown, in the process of changing for dinner.

"You look like the devil, Lee," he said.

"So do you."

"I feel like the devil."

"So do I. Have a brandy?"

Lord Rayne poured his own, but paused before drinking.

"What do you say to a moratorium, Lee? Just let her go on as Miss Whalley till we can see our way clear to the best course?"

Courtney shrugged. "It's your house. So long as I'm in it, I'll play your way."

Rayne sighed. "Well, that's my way for now."

He raised his glass; after a pause, Courtney raised his, and they both drank in token of a bargain made. When Rayne left, Courtney rang for Gustaf, and began to dress for dinner.

Lady Rayne sat at her dressing table, while her tiring-woman meticulously blended powders into the perfect shade of silvery blue for her heavy eyelids.

"Bring your father in here," she said to Zoe, as she heard him return to his own room, adjoining.

Zoe put down the tortoise-shell-handled file she had been using absently to shape her long, fine nails, and went to the door, which was standing ajar.

"Papa..."

He looked a little surprised. "Didn't I just leave you across the way?"

"I came, Papa, because I had something to tell you. And Mother."

"Oh, damn. Sounds bad."

"Oh, no," smiled Zoe. "Not really. It is just that I have contracted to marry Stephen Beaumont."

"What is it, contagious, this marrying?" snapped Rayne.

"Now, Papa, you know it's been in the wind for some time. And you have always approved of Lord Stephen."

"Lord Stephen is an admirable *parti* in all ways, my daughter. He is steady, sensible, pleasant, and if his brother will have the sense to pop off as the doctors are always saying he will any day, he will be very rich, and in line for the dukedom. Meantime, he is rich enough, and of impeccable blood lines, of course. Lord Stephen is all a fond father's heart could wish for. I give you my blessing. I take it you were asking for my blessing? Or has that become an entirely extraneous item?"

Zoe patted his cheek, and kissed him.

"Of course I wanted your blessing. But I thought I had already got it, when you told Stephen he was welcome to me, if he could detach M. de Monteuil."

Lord Rayne grinned. "Oh, he told you about that, did he? Well, I always thought Stephen was a man of candor. Shall I see him soon?"

"I think so. But, as you say, Salsworthy is very ill, and Stephen thinks he had best stay home for the time being, and dance attendance. You know how his father is."

"Ah, yes, His Grace of Alvers. What an old bastard. Now, Claire," he added, aside to his wife, who looked pained, "he is an old bastard, and you know it."

"He is Alvers," said Lady Rayne.

"And that justifies him, before God and man. I take it you approve of this match?"

"I do," said Lady Rayne.

When Zoe had left the room, she added, "And I have no intention of seeing Zoe come to grief through Courtney's mad escapades. What do you imagine Alvers

would think of Miss Whalley?"

Miss Whalley, in darkest ignorance of all that had gone on between the members of her husband's family, prepared for her first dinner in company with some trepidation, but more excitement. She changed her mind at least three times about what to wear, and whether to wear a wig or her own hair. When she finally appeared in the Dutch Room, shortly before half past eight, she felt she had been correct in her decision to wear the wig, a buff-and-white semi-natural creation that added to her sense of sophistication and a rather reassuring feeling of not being her own vulnerable self at all, but someone who, because she looked the part, would be able to play it.

She quite enjoyed dinner, seated between Mr. MacLeith, of the pall mall game, and a handsome Frenchman named Monteuil. M. de Monteuil was the first real, true Frenchman Susan had ever met, and a count at that. He did not say "zee" for "the," or lard his conversation with "*n'est-ce pas*" and "*voyez-vous*" the way French characters did in novels, but he did speak with an unmistakable lilt and he did punctuate his sentences with elaborate manual flourishes. He told entertaining stories about life and customs on the Continent, and when Susan evinced a desire to improve her French, he gallantly offered to help her find a suitable tutor. On the whole, dinner passed so agreeably that Susan hardly noticed that none of Lord Rayne's family spoke one word to her, or that Lord Courtney sat beside Isabel Wolsey, and appeared to hang on her every word.

But when she went to bed, in the relatively modest little room far at the back of the great house, it did occur to Susan that she had not spoken with Courtney since early afternoon, that she had been told nothing of his family discussions or of how they were to go on together in future. She began to feel very much alone.

After all, she thought uneasily, she didn't really know any of these people. Even Courtney, for all she had trusted him implicitly, was largely a mystery to her. She knew he didn't love her; his whole attitude made that plain. So why had he married her? She thought he had

done it on a point of honor, because he felt responsible. And she sometimes even fancied she amused him. But when she compared herself to Lady Zoe, or Isabel Wolsey—and there must be many such accomplished and attractive ladies, she thought, among his exalted acquaintance—Susan became very depressed. Perhaps he had married her for some other reason than a noble sense of duty, some dark, sinister and maybe even maniacal reason like those that motivated the characters of fiction. Perhaps Lord Courtney was a Bluebeard, with a whole collection of reckless young girls sequestered—dead or alive—on a rockbound island in the Hebrides. Perhaps he was a trafficker in female flesh, who, after sampling his merchandise, sold it to the brothel keepers of London, or even abroad.

What nonsense! Susan told herself stoutly. But in the dark of the unfamiliar room, enshrouded by the white curtains of the bed, she shivered. She found her ears straining for some ominous sound, and felt a strong compulsion to strike a light. Then she resolutely put a curb to her imagination.

How very silly you are! There has been nothing havey-cavey so far. He said he would marry you, and he did, before witnesses and by the offices of a vicar you've known all your life. He said he was the son of Lord Rayne, and here you are on Lord Rayne's estate, and it is all just as it says in the Peerage. No, Susan decided, there was nothing Gothic about it. Courtney had married her, as she had thought from the start, out of a sense of duty and responsibility, and because he had not found her quite intolerable.

But what if he changed his mind? In spite of her firm resolutions, Susan shivered again, and huddled in the middle of the bed, clutching her pillow like a lover. What if his family convinced him she was intolerable? She was certain Lady Rayne would never find her tolerable. What if Lord Courtney came to believe that he could not tolerate this mismatched bride of his? What would become of her then?

# *VII*

In the morning, Susan was ashamed to recall her melodramatic suspicions. The day was fine once more, the prospect from her window as charming as ever, and she had a slight nagging headache that served to remind her that she had drunk rather more wine at dinner than she was used to. Surely this intemperance, she thought, was largely responsible for the anxieties that had beset her in the night. Susan went down to breakfast with her head and her spirits high, determined that if Courtney failed to come to her, she would simply seek him out and satisfy her curiosity by asking point-blank what was going on.

She did not see him at breakfast. He came down very late, and, though they did exchange greetings, Susan was unable to extricate herself discreetly from the company to have a private word with him. When she finally managed to get off by herself, he had vanished. She saw him later, deep in a game of cards with his mother, his sister, and M. de Monteuil. Susan turned her attention to amusing herself.

This she did not find difficult to do. Accustomed as she was to life in the country, where her range of activities and acquaintances had been severely limited, she took endless delight in mingling with the rather oddly assorted company, and listening to them talk. There were lively discussions of politics, knowledgeable discussions of literature, and gossip about everything and everybody, including many of the figures Susan knew from the pages of the newspapers. She listened to heated discussions of the struggle between the young William Pitt and Charles

James Fox, the Whig, for control over the wild Prince of Wales, and of the much contended question of the establishment of a Regency. She heard critiques of the arts; from the older generation, laments over the state of the theater, reminiscences of the great Garrick, grudging admiration for John Kemble, comparison between the old-fashioned Goldsmith and the modern Sheridan, whose best works, some maintained, were already behind him. She joined in discussions of poetry, the works of old Cowper, and young William Blake, whose few published pieces Susan admired without really knowing why, and Robert Burns, whom she loved dearly, like a friend. And she sat, spellbound, while Mr. MacLeith described the wonderful new steam engine that was being perfected by Mr. James Watt of Glasgow, and his visions of its possible applications.

"Good God, can't you see the poor child's bored to tears by your silly machines?" interrupted a small, pretty woman who, dismissing Susan's protests with an airy wave, bore her off to see the latest collection of fashion plates from Paris, which, it is to be owned, Susan enjoyed thoroughly.

The morning passed away, and the afternoon, and somehow it was evening before Susan realized that another day was gone and she had never found the opportunity to speak to her husband alone. At dinner, of course, it would be impossible, and after dinner, when everyone would be gathered indoors, it would be much more difficult than it would have been during the day in the garden. Susan berated herself for not having been more vigilant—there *must* have been a chance, if only she had seen it—and wondered glumly if Courtney was avoiding her.

This question was answered as she was dressing for dinner, seated before the glass in her stays and petticoats, having her hair combed and clipping a toenail that had put a hole through her stocking. She looked down to inspect the toenail, and when she looked up again, Lord Courtney stood inside the door, his image reflected in the glass. Susan started; Nancy dropped a box of pins.

Courtney ignored the disturbance. He beckoned to Susan to come to him, which she did, and they stood in the window while Nancy knelt on the floor retrieving hairpins and trying to look as if she wasn't listening.

"I take it you're comfortable," said his lordship, glancing round.

"Oh, yes," said Susan.

"Well, then, if you don't mind, we'll just go on as we are for some little while. Rayne and I are agreed it's best, for the time being."

The time being what? Susan wondered. And for how long? But she lowered her lashes and said, "Of course, my lord. It will be as you wish," and was rewarded by a smile and a light touch on the cheek.

"I'm sure you understand, we like to keep up appearances, and so on. When this crowd has gone away and it's just the family, we shall see how we are to go on."

"Very well, my lord," said Susan.

He patted her cheek again, and then made as if to leave the room.

"Is it any use to ask this girl to hold her tongue below stairs?" he asked, giving Nancy a cold blue look.

"Of course!" cried Susan. "She hasn't told about Grisé's Hotel, has she? Nancy is very discreet and trustworthy, aren't you, Nancy?"

"I do my best, ma'am," replied Nancy, holding her back very straight and stiff.

"Then you are indeed a treasure, Carson," said Courtney, and smiled, proving by the use of her name that Nancy was not so unknown to him as he had previously implied.

Nancy unbent not a whit, and when he had gone forgot herself so far as to mutter, "Is *he* trustworthy? That's what I'd like to know."

But Susan pretended she didn't hear.

Dinner on this second evening was much like the first, except that Susan was more profoundly uneasy, and had sworn off the wine, so even M. de Monteuil failed to entertain her as he had the night before. And when the women went into the drawing room, leaving the men to

their wine, she found that Isabel, who had been quite friendly, seemed distant, which added to her feeling of alienation.

When the men came in, it was obvious the burgundy had flowed freely. Courtney and Gerald retired immediately to a corner and produced a pair of dice. Lord Rayne joined them, and he and Courtney were soon engaged in a quid pro quo that had reduced Gerald to helpless laughter. Each roll of the dice was accompanied by a remark which, to judge by Courtney's sardonic smile and the gleam in Rayne's eye, was outrageous. Mr. MacLeith and Mr. Willerton gravitated towards them. The only man left with the ladies was M. de Monteuil, who conversed with Zoe and appeared content. Lady Gore gazed rather longingly into the rowdy corner. Mrs. Willerton sniffed disgustedly.

Lady Rayne, as hostess, determined that some action must be taken to correct this indecorous situation. She levitated from the satin settee. As she approached, Courtney, without appearing to notice her, lifted one foot to a rung under the table, and tilted back in his chair. And just as his mother opened her mouth to call them all to order, Courtney's chair crashed over backwards. With admirable presence of mind, Gerald rescued the decanter as the gaming table upset, and, to everyone's amazement, Courtney landed on his feet behind the overturned chair.

"Dear, dear," he said, straightening his cuffs as he contemplated the debris. "How clumsy of me. Gentlemen, I think perhaps we had best adjourn to the Card Room. If the ladies will excuse us...?"

Lady Rayne had paled to a deathly white, but she made a graceful gesture with one hand, shrugged, and laughed. But when her eye fell on Susan, whose face was full of childish delight and amusement, she shot her such a look of loathing that Susan, chancing to glance her way, had to suppress a shudder of recoil.

Afterwards, in her boudoir, Lady Rayne expressed her feelings in no uncertain terms.

"Rayne, the boy is wild. He *must* be disciplined."

"Damn!" said Rayne. "He's quick, that's what he is. I

never could do a reverse somersault."

"Bernard, your son is a hellion. And you condone his worst behavior. You positively encourage his dissipations; you smile at the most blatant disrespect—"

"Come now, Claire, that wasn't disrespect. That was self-preservation! You were about to devastate us with some unspeakably cutting observation—"

"—blatant disrespect!" she repeated, too angry to tolerate interruption. "This disgraceful marriage of his, Bernard, is only the logical conclusion of your indulging the boy in the most irresponsible way. We must stop it!"

"I don't know." Musing, Lord Rayne turned his brandy to catch the candlelight. "I begin to find Miss Whalley rather charming."

"She's a bumpkin!" cried Her Ladyship.

"Luscious figure."

Lady Rayne's eyelids fluttered dangerously.

"I will not have her, Rayne."

"Neither shall I," he smiled. "More's the pity."

Susan endured. The long, lazy summer days continued, and so long as she could forget her personal situation, Susan enjoyed them. But, even as her sophistication and conversability increased, she felt more and more insecure and uncertain. One by one, the guests went away, and as they did, the singularity of Miss Whalley's position became more and more obvious. Days were not so bad, what with walking and riding out, when it was fine, and the menfolk around. But nights came to be a trial. After dinner, the gentlemen's retirement to the Card Room with their brandy came to be an accepted thing, and Susan was left alone in the great drawing room with her mother-in-law, whose distant politeness amounted to rudeness, so similar was it to the manner in which she treated servants, and Isabel, who seemed to be at a loss entirely as to how to treat her. Only Zoe continued friendly and easy, but even she was disheartened by her mother's icily correct implacability. Long silences reigned in the drawing room, broken only by the whisper of Lady Rayne's thread being pulled through her

needlepoint canvas. Susan wondered how long this state of affairs was to continue.

It continued until the last guest was gone. M. de Monteuil departed for a visit to his estates in Picardy. Isabel had her small valise sent round to her grandmother's, where she lived only a few miles away, and on that same morning, Susan received a summons from Lady Rayne. Heart pounding, she followed Stokes, Lady Rayne's dresser, round a full two sides of the Square Corridor, and found herself for the first time in the family's wing of the house.

Susan's hands trembled, and her throat felt dry, but she asked herself, What can Her Ladyship do to me? She can say nasty things, perhaps, maybe insult me. But that's all. She can only frighten me if I let her.

All too soon, she was being ushered into an opulent room of royal blue velvets and mahogany, and books bound in royal blue morocco with gold leaf. Lady Rayne looked up from her writing-table, where she was sorting papers. Light streamed in from the window behind her.

"Ah, yes. Miss Whalley."

"Please call me by my right name, Lady Rayne," Susan heard herself saying, incredibly.

A silence fell, and drifted deep over the room before Lady Rayne spoke again.

"Miss Whalley, I think it is time we came to an understanding. During the past week, I have had investigations made in... Hawley, I believe it is. Your home." She paused. "I find that indeed you and my son were married, on August 13 of this year, by a Rev. Clarence Gorton, at St. Mary's Church. But..." She paused again. "I believe there is some question as to the legality of this marriage."

Susan paled, then flushed, then paled again, as she thought of how her father had horsewhipped his lordship, and wondered if that could possibly make the marriage illegal.

Lady Rayne assessed her reaction, and then went on to say, "Of course, if you wish to contest this, we could take it to court."

Susan thought of Courtney's claim that he could have her father hanged, or transported. She went paler still, and wavered on her feet as though she had received a physical blow.

"To court," repeated Lady Rayne. "But of course, I see no reason it should come to that. Your marriage could be dissolved quietly, without undue publicity. It would be to your advantage."

Susan's eyes were puzzled now. Dissolved? What did she mean, the marriage could be dissolved?

"I don't see how," said Susan.

Lady Rayne's eyes glittered. Just as she thought. The venal young slut had risen to the bait.

"Lord Rayne and I are in a position to compensate you handsomely for your cooperation."

"Compensate?" echoed Susan, flabbergasted.

"I will pay you £2500 to pack your bags and leave immediately, and I will send you an additional £3000 when the annulment is made final."

Susan just stared. How could anyone hate her so much as that? How could she possibly be that bad?

"You are at liberty to consider this offer for one hour, Miss Whalley. And consider also that if you refuse, there will assuredly be a very ugly, very expensive court battle." (It was obvious the girl was terrified of this. Why? Lady Rayne wondered.) "Which you will certainly lose in the end." As Susan continued to stand still, she added, "Miss Whalley, you may go."

Like an automaton, Susan started for the door. Tears of helplessness and despair blinded her, but she managed to get the door open, and found herself in the hall. A footman passed, carrying a large vase of flowers. Purely by instinct, she collared him, and asked him which was Lord Courtney's room. Stifling his astonishment, he pointed out a corner door at the end of the wing.

Courtney was in the process of being shaved, when his door burst open and Susan tumbled in. He was too astounded even to swear.

"I don't want money!" cried Susan. "How could you possibly think I wanted money? If you wish me to go, just

say so. I'll go! I don't want everybody to hate me! I never meant... I never meant... Oh my lord, I'll do anything, only don't hang my Papa!"

With this, she collapsed in tears at the Earl's feet.

"What the *hell*..?" shouted Courtney.

He grabbed the towel from Gustaf, who had prudently removed the basin of soapy water from under his chin, and began to dash the lather from his face, trying meanwhile to pick the sobbing young woman up from the floor.

"Hell. It's in my eyes. I can't see a damned thing. Gustaf!"

The valet lifted Susan in his arms, and deposited her in a large chair. Then he approached Courtney with a clean damp towel, and wiped the soap from his red and angry eyes.

"Now, Susan," he said sternly, bending over her. "What is all this?" Suddenly he caught the drift of one of her incoherent statements. "Who is going to hang your father? Oh, my God, Rayne hasn't found out?"

"I don't know," hiccoughed Susan. "But she said it would go to court if I didn't take the money and go away. But I don't want any money. How could you think I wanted money?"

Courtney's face hardened, and gradually the taut line of his upper lip went white.

"Susan." He took her by the shoulders. "Susan, I swear to you, I know nothing of what you say. Nothing. It is absolutely new to me."

Her sobs began to subside, and ceased altogether when he gathered her to his chest.

"But," he murmured, "I think I am beginning to figure it out. Gustaf?"

"Milord?"

"Have the barouche brought round. Double-quick. I want to be out of here in half an hour. Our things can be sent after us."

If Lady Rayne heard the crunch of wheels and the ring of horseshoes in front of the house, she assumed it was Isabel setting out for her grandmother's. The first she

knew of her son's departure was when she sent for Stokes to go fetch Susan's answer to her proposal. Stokes informed Her Ladyship that Miss Whalley had left the house with Lord Courtney fully half an hour before. Lady Rayne looked like death.

"Where are we going?" asked Susan, not much caring.

She sat back against the familiar yellow-brown upholstery and felt somehow exhilarated that she and Courtney were once more off on an adventure together. Of course, he had broken with his family, and was very much upset, but for some reason he held her in his arms, and that was enough to make Susan's heart sing. If someone had told her he was not so much holding her as clinging to her, she would have thought they were mad.

"We are going to Courtney," he said. "Courtney Castle. It's mine. At least I think it's mine," he added under his breath. "God, I don't know what is mine; is anything mine? Can he take everything from me?" Forcing himself to abandon this distressing line of thought, he continued, "Courtney Castle. It's not far. It's sort of a pet of mine. Used to be a Norman stronghold. My nurse is there; takes care of the place."

Nurse? It seemed incredible to Susan that this person had ever been a little boy with a nurse. Nurses were for scolding and petting and spanking. Could anyone ever have spanked Lord Courtney?

He twisted in his seat, and rearranged his legs.

"Your back pains you," observed Susan.

"Yes, it does sometimes. Damndest thing. The skin is quite knit, but it aches inside. Looks like hell, too; like a Saracen slave. I shall never make love naked again." His distant voice came clearer as he added, "Except to you," and smiled.

Susan blushed. He turned her face to him and kissed her lingeringly. He felt her breasts and followed the curve of her thigh through her skirts. Embarrassed and discommoded by the jouncing of the carriage and the unexpectedness of the overture, Susan was awkward. After a few moments, he disisted. She knew she had failed to live up to some expectations, but what those

expectations had been, she wasn't sure.

"If your back hurts," she volunteered, "I could massage your neck for you. That always seemed to help my mama when she had backache."

"Good idea."

He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, found that his coat was too tight across his shoulders, removed it, and then leaned forward again. Susan reached out and began to work at the knotty muscles at the base of nis neck. He said nothing, but after a moment he put his hand back and untied the ribbon that confined his hair. It swung forward over his ears, giving Susan more room to maneuver. She massaged his head at the hairline and several inches above. He sighed.

"That's wonderful. As good as Gustaf."

He let her continue till her fingers ached. Then, when she stopped to rest, he pulled off his boots, lifted his feet onto the seat opposite, and twisted round till his head lay in her lap. She carried on more gently, stroking his head and shoulders till his even breathing told her he had fallen asleep. She could feel his heartbeat against her thigh.

For some time the carriage rolled along small, relatively comfortable roads between neat borders of trees and shrubs, past fields dotted with sheep and embellished with gnarled and beautiful apple trees. Susan thought of her home country, where mile after mile of land stretched flat and fertile, broken only by the canals and the windmills standing tall with their white sails. Every so often there occurred what they called an "island," a raised section of land. Squire Whalley's house stood on the edge of one of these, and Susan had loved to stand at the back of the house and look out on the wide Dutch-style landscape. Now, she thought, this was to be her home, the scenic, disorderly up-and-down country of Kent. And was she to live in a castle? As she mused, Susan found that the yellow and green light that played outside the window was becoming indistinct. Her eyelids fluttered, and she let her head fall back against the velvet cushions. Then all at once the carriage was traveling over

stone, with a clatter and a jogging that awoke both Susan and Courtney with a start.

"Ah," said Courtney. "My road. We're here."

"Your road?"

"I excavated it. It was a part of a Roman road that led, some think, to Dover. There was a camp here at one time. You can see the depressions in the grass from the top of the tower."

Susan peered out the window. There was indeed a tower, a tall stone cylinder that squinted dubiously at them through stern slits under a crown of perfectly preserved battlements.

"Is that your castle?"

"That's the keep. The living quarters tumble down the hill on the other side. It was regularly lived in, you see, till the middle of the last century. Charming, isn't it?"

Susan nodded, wide-eyed. The coach drew up outside an arched gateway which was imposing, but at the same time faintly absurd, for the surrounding wall had been allowed to fall down. Chunks of it stood at irregular intervals in the fields, but for the most part there was only grass and a profusion of wild flowers scattered among the fallen stones.

"There's an easier entrance round the back," said Courtney, "but this is the one I like."

They got out of the carriage. Susan shook out her skirts and prepared to mount a lengthy flight of steps that led to the keep. As they climbed, the tower loomed over them. The gateway fell behind and the green fields and clumps of woodland spread below. At the top of the stairs, with the studded oaken doors at one's back and the land broad under one's feet, the sensation of power and property was intense. Courtney pounded on the door with his fist.

It was several minutes before a sturdy, grizzled manservant appeared to pull the creaking doors open.

"Coachman came round the back, milord, or we'd never have known you was here," said the servant, in a grumbling sort of tone. "It's all holland covers and dust,

milord; all holland covers and dust."

"Never mind, Joseph. We've just come on a whim. I promise we'll go right away till you have everything put in order."

Joseph looked slightly less disgruntled.

"Yes, milord."

They passed through a narrow vestibule created by the double wall of the tower, and entered the main hall. This was a large, circular room that seemed to occupy the whole of the inside of the keep. The floor was flagged, with a hearth in the middle and a vent in the ceiling between dark exposed beams, but most of it was covered by a striking circular carpet that depicted the signs of the zodiac. The only furnishings seemed to be a few large, dark chairs and a table or two. Susan felt for all the world as if she had just been transported in time to the stronghold of a medieval baron.

"Where's Sarah?" asked Courtney, suppressing a sneeze behind his handkerchief.

As if in reply, there came an eerie echo of wooden clogs on stone. Courtney strode across the room to a door opposite the entrance.

"My love," he said down the stairs, "Joseph tells me you are all at sixes and sevens because I am come without warning, but I told him you are never at sixes and sevens."

"Lord love us," came a peppery but slightly quavering voice, "the Heir is up to some deviltry; he's being charming."

A very small woman, all withered skin and jutting bones, appeared in the doorway, and submitted to being kissed on the cheek. Then she stood back.

"The Heir is looking thin," she pronounced, disapprovingly.

"Sarah, you will never be satisfied till I'm so fat I develop the gout."

Susan, contemplating the Libra under her feet, her own sign, felt absolutely invisible. Neither of the servants had so much as looked at her. She got the impression it was not an unusual thing for Courtney to appear with an unidentified female in tow.

"Now, then," he said, recalling her presence, "come here, my dear, and meet Sarah. Sarah, this is my bride. We were married two weeks ago."

The old woman's black button eyes gleamed suddenly. She swept a stiff-jointed but still graceful curtsey.

"Your ladyship is most welcome to Courtney Castle."

Susan smiled, though a spot of color appeared in each cheek as she was unabashedly scrutinized.

It appeared that she passed muster, for Sarah went on, with a more friendly air, "Perhaps your ladyship will be wanting some tea to refresh you after your journey? There's water on the boil, can be ready in five minutes. We've no cakes, but there's fresh white bread and some red currant jam, if your ladyship would fancy such humble fare."

"Red currant jam is my favorite," said Susan, and Sarah smiled. As she turned to go fetch the refreshments, she said confidentially, "Your ladyship will mind he eats well. He is looking thin."

"It's a miracle I didn't grow up fat as a pig," said Courtney, as he and Susan took their seats in a couple of the chairs from which Joseph had removed the covers.

By the time tea came, with a mountain of bread and creamy butter and cheese and sweet thick jam, the Earl had launched into a convoluted history of the castle, complete with Norman warlords and Saxon rebellions. For some time Susan buttered slices of bread which he ate absently as he continued to talk. Sarah, standing by, looked on approvingly.

Afterwards, Courtney said, "We must go away, as I promised Joseph, so he can put things to rights. If he does any more dusting under my nose, I shall asphyxiate. Come, I'll show you the countryside."

Susan agreed with alacrity. First, they made their way down a few stone steps to the master bedroom, a chamber of unimpressive proportions made sympathetic by a stout, square bed hung with faded brown velvet and a large brass-bound chest that might have come from some pirate ship. Inside this, Courtney found them some more appropriate clothes.

"Here," he said, holding up a loose white blouse, a laced bodice, and a bright red petticoat. "You will be enchanting as Cherry, the innkeeper's daughter. And I shall be Squire Sullen!"

He laughed, and pulled on a pair of countrified breeches and a leather jerkin.

"You put on theatrical productions here?" asked Susan.

"When I was a boy, we came summers for a lark sometimes. A lot of cousins and whatever adults we could find to put up with the old-fashioned inconveniences. We played at Robin Hood on fine days, and amused ourselves with theater when it rained. It was good fun, while it lasted."

Falling silent, he led her upstairs again, and through the main hall. They climbed the narrow steps to the battlements. It was dark, and Susan was nervous of spiders, but the view from the top of the tower was spectacular. The arched gate stood in solitary splendor to one side, and to the other a series of square architectural units, comprising bedroom and kitchens, all added on at various different periods, straggled down the slope. Beyond, a diminutive village nestled in a hollow between a low grassy rise and a higher wooded one. Susan could see the stretch of Roman road, and the faint outlines of long-vanished walls.

Afterwards, they retraced their steps to the main hall, and then went out the front door, descended the stair for a ways, and cut off through the grass, clambering over fallen sections of defensive wall. They wandered off across the fields.

Susan expected the conversation to turn to their problems, and their uncertain future, but Courtney seemed only to want to speak of sports and games and holidays, and history, and the countryside. He pointed out landmarks, and named all the trees and flowers.

"My lord," blurted Susan suddenly, "was it anything I did? Perhaps my manners, you know, or my way of speaking, or something, disgusted them?"

"No, darling, you did nothing wrong. Only I was wrong, to trust them. We should have made it known from the start that you were my wife, and then they would have had to make the best of it. And even the worst could have been no worse than we have come to now."

There was a pause.

Then Susan said brightly, "I should very much like to see a baby deer, with white spots on, and a little white tail."

"And brown eyes like yours," said Courtney. "Perhaps we shall."

By the time they returned to the keep, two hours later, the weather had done its work on them. They sang country songs as they tramped up the long stair, and their arms were full of white and yellow daisies.

"Oh, dear," said Susan, just as they reached the door. "I do believe I have trod on a bee."

She balanced on one foot as she tried to look at the sole of the other. Courtney dumped his daisies in her arms and swept her up into his. When he had carried her into the hall, he knelt with her on the zodiac carpet. Together they examined the small white foot for signs of bee-sting.

"Well, I suppose it's nothing," Susan concluded. "But it did hurt for a moment."

Courtney gave her an abrupt look full of whimsy.

"Do you realize, I have just carried you over the threshold."

Susan smiled. "So now we are really married."

"No. There is one thing lacking."

He put his lips to hers, and whatever she had been unable to give impromptu in the carriage, she was able to give now. She kissed him ardently, sensing that he needed her. The flowers were scattered about them and they lay on the floor. Courtney covered his wife's slim body with his own.

"I vow," came a cool voice out of nowhere, "I cannot decide if it is more boorish to reveal my presence, or simply to look the other way."

At the first intimation of the presence of a third person,

Courtney was on his feet. His face was contorted with fear. He crouched in the stance of a fighter, ready for murder.

"Great God!" exclaimed Lord Rayne.

Susan scrambled to her feet.

"My lord! We... we beg your pardon. We didn't know you were here." It was an unnecessary remark, but it served to give everyone a moment to recover.

"It is I who should beg your pardon," said Rayne politely. "I should have spoken when you first came in."

He was sitting across the hall, in a dark leather chair. He wore dark clothes, and black riding boots, but still, it was extraordinary that they should have failed to notice him.

"What can you possibly have to say to us, Rayne?" Courtney had got over his first fright, and, though his hands were shaking, his voice was steady. "Have you come to insult us further?"

"I have come," said Lord Rayne, "to apologize. For my wife. I beg you will come home and give her a chance to apologize for herself. She had no authority to act as she did. I have made her understand that, I think, quite clearly."

Susan saw where Courtney got his temper from, and his terrible stone face in anger. She could almost find it in her heart to be sorry for Lady Rayne.

"She acted entirely on her own initiative?" asked Courtney. "Sending spies to Hawley—was that her idea too?"

"I would never spy on you. If you said you were married, you were married. What's to spy?"

"Her La'ship seems to have hinted there was a question of legality. I think there is not."

Lord Rayne shrugged. "Purely a tactic of intimidation." He scowled. "A nasty piece of work all round."

Apparently forgotten, Susan sat down quietly, while Courtney continued to stand facing his father, his eyes still troubled.

"As I recall, my lord, you indulged in some work of intimidation, too. Or were you serious?"

"About the inheritance? Certainly I was serious. I should never be frivolous about such a matter. But I was not serious in the way you mean. I was rattling my saber. And perhaps punishing you, too, in a way. I was hurt, I was angry; I felt betrayed. But I love you far more than my own pride, boy. I would never disinherit you. You are my son, my immortality. I could no more cut you off than I could geld myself."

Courtney's face lightened slowly, then broke into a flashing grin.

"I am quite safe, then," he said, and Lord Rayne laughed.

"That you are. I intend to entail the whole business. We'll see to it this season, when we're in Town."

Susan was depressed. Of course, she was glad Courtney was not to quarrel with his father, or be cut off without a shilling, but it always seemed that when Lord Rayne was around, no one else existed for his son. Now they would go back to Queen's Crown, and Susan would become a nobody again. Courtney would no longer need her. She would become just another one of the members of his personal entourage. She bit her lip, and kept her brimming eyes on her hands. No one noticed.

"If you really want to know," said Courtney, "I'll tell you the full circumstances now."

"No." Lord Rayne thought of the terrible look of hate and fear he had seen on his son's face, and he knew that if he ever discovered what had taught him to look that way, he would have to swear vengeance. "No; you have chosen your own way, which I accept."

The extent of Lord Rayne's acceptance became clear as soon as they had all returned to Queen's Crown. Still dusty from the journey, Susan and Courtney received a well-rehearsed and thoroughly insincere apology from Her Ladyship, who was half choking with humiliation but dared not defy her husband, who stood grim and implacable by her side. Then, after having had a chance to clean up and dress for dinner, they all gathered in the Dutch Room, as usual. Susan noticed that Isabel was still there; she stood next to Zoe and seemed anxious to speak

to Susan but forced herself to wait for a more private opportunity. Lord Rayne summoned the servants to the main hall, where they stood side by side, two rows deep, in what appeared to be an instinctive pecking order. The kitchenmaids were obviously trying very hard not to giggle; the chambermaids exchanged little nods and winks with the footmen, who turned down the corners of their mouths and looked wise. Speculations seemed to hover in the air, alighting occasionally on the shoulder of someone who would give a little gasp and address a comment to his neighbor. But when Lord Rayne turned to address them, all foot-shuffling and elbow-nudging ceased.

His announcement was short and very much to the point. Certain circumstances, he said, had previously made public revelation undesirable, but circumstances had happily been altered, and it was with great pleasure and understandable pride (here he smiled at Susan, who blushed furiously) that he announced the marriage of his son and the charming and most estimable Miss Whalley, of Ely. Miss Whalley—Lady Lakewood—would immediately take up her position as the wife of his son and heir.

This last was rightly taken by the upper echelon of servants as an indication that no discourtesy to the new Lady Lakewood, or recalcitrance in serving her, would be tolerated. Stokes, of course, might snub Nancy Carson in the most high-handed manner, and Mrs. Quarles might sniff and raise her nose in the air whenever Lady Lakewood's name was mentioned, but Susan would never know it. She was to receive only the most respectful treatment, and, in time, she became quite a favorite below stairs.

Upstairs, Susan was walking with Isabel on the terrace.

"Perhaps I shouldn't mention it at all," said Isabel, "but I do want you to know how foolish I've been, for I do hope we shall be the best of friends."

"I hope so," murmured Susan politely, wondering if all the people who had been cool to her would now be anxious to become bosom friends.

"Well, you see, that first day you were here—or was it

the second? I don't recall precisely. At any rate, I was going to come to your room, just before dinner, to see if you needed any help, or would like to come down with me. But just as I was about to scratch at your door, I heard voices." Isabel looked embarrassed. "You and Hunter. You were talking of your maid's discretion, and Grisé's Hotel in London. So of course I thought..."

Susan stepped in to help her. "Perfectly natural. I understand."

Isabel smiled suddenly. "Do you know, at one time I thought perhaps you were a natural daughter of Rayne's, to explain to myself why Lady Rayne disliked you so! But it was so much more likely that you were a mistress of Hunter's. And it's not that I'm censorious. But it was such an odd situation, his bringing you to Queen's crown, you so young, and... and not his type at all. I really didn't know what to think, or how to go on with you. I am sorry if I seemed unfriendly."

"It's all right," said Susan. "I can see you felt awkward."

They walked together for a few moments under the night sky, feeling not quite companionable yet, but as if a companionship could certainly grow. It was a good feeling.

"What," asked Susan, out of a silence, "is Courtney's 'type'?"

"Well, all sorts, really. He didn't get his name from hunting foxes, you know. But his mistresses have generally been rather grand. Older, very smart, very polished. Like Heather Clarke. Rich, spoilt, very beautiful. Bit decadent, I should say, though I don't know her very well. All the men are mad for her; all the women think she's a cat. But she's a Duke's daughter, so they receive her all the same."

"Oh," said Susan, and she felt the first sickening pangs of jealousy.

The pangs left her while she sat at dinner by Lord Rayne, and listened to his stories and laughed at his frequent jokes, but they returned when she found herself alone with her husband in her new bedroom, a gorgeous

green and gilt chamber only one door from his. She watched the lean, graceful figure in the multicolored Persian banian. His movements, she thought, were too easy, too choreographed, too practiced. He had been in too many bedrooms, with too many women. It could mean nothing to him to be here with her tonight. Susan felt alienated and withdrawn.

Courtney slipped one arm about her waist, and took her chin in his hand, with caressing fingers.

"You are beautiful tonight," he said. "Your eyes are so soft and deep, I could lose myself in them."

How many times has he said that, I wonder? thought Susan.

As he kissed her, she felt a surge of rebelliousness. He doesn't really want me now, she thought. He is here only because it is expected of him. And she pulled free of his embrace.

"Are you nervous, my darling?" he asked, reaching for her hand.

She shook her head.

"I'm just... not ready, my lord."

He smiled, and drew on her hand.

"Come to bed. You'll be ready soon enough."

"If you don't mind," said Susan, "I'd rather not."

"If I don't mind? Of course I mind. What's the matter with you?" His voice became stern. "Get into bed, Susan."

She was intimidated. If she didn't do as he said, he might take her by force; he had the right. Susan got into bed.

But Courtney was neither as selfish nor as blasé as she thought. He was a passionate, sensual man, and proud of his skill as a lover. He found the experience of making love to an unwilling woman both new and disagreeable.

"Do you intend to simply lie there like a dead fish?" he snapped, when kisses and caresses had availed him naught.

"I am not required to kiss you and make up to you," said Susan. "I am only required to let you have your will of me."

"Required? *Required*? No woman has ever submitted

to my embrace because she was required!" cried Courtney.

He got out of bed and put on his splendid dressing gown once more.

"You have given me your maidenhead, and I have given you my name. Though the two things are more traditionally done in reverse order, I suppose that is really all that is 'required' between us. Madam, I bid you good night."

I knew he didn't really want me, thought Susan, and she turned her face to the wall as her husband left the room.

# *VIII*

Their return to London was a sensation, or so the newspapers insisted. An official announcement had been published in mid-August, and by the time Courtney and his bride took up residence in Grosvenor Square on the first day of September, there was no one in London—at least, no one who cared for such things—who hadn't heard and formed an opinion of the match.

"A scandal," said some. "You notice Lord Rayne has stayed home. He wouldn't countenance this *mésalliance*."

"And if he had come to Town," replied others, "you would say he didn't trust the girl not to disgrace him. No, I think it was a romance of long standing. Some impediment has recently been removed."

"An elopement," said many. "There will be a young viscount within six months."

"She'd never dare come to Town, if that were the case," disagreed a few. "No, it's simple enough; the Hunter finally lost his heart."

"Your ladyship is a nine day's wonder," said Nancy.

Susan sighed.

"And no one ever lets me forget it! Everywhere I go, I am gawked at, or slyly peeked at, or quizzed, or investigated. My clothes, my looks, my manners are all subject to the minutest scrutiny, and no one takes any pains to pretend it is otherwise. I feel like a horse on show!"

"That will be over soon enough," said Nancy. "They'll find something else to occupy them, and you'll be quite forgotten, except by those who have become your friends."

Susan sighed again, and frowned at her reflection in the mirror.

"But in the meantime, Nan, I am introduced to so many people, my head swims. I must remember everything, so I shall be sure to smile at the right people, and only nod my head at others. I must remember so many names, and remember whether I have actually been introduced, or only heard of them all. And I must have on the tip of my tongue the entire roster of Courtney's relations. Can you imagine, his lordship had an odious great-aunt, who was married three times. She bore ten children, who all survived, and six of them were girls. All of those girls are still alive, and married, so they all have different names, and several of them have grown-up children, who are also married, and have still different names. But all of them are related, and so I must know who they are. And that's only *one* great-aunt!" Susan consulted a scribbled list which she kept under her powder box and consulted whenever she had a free moment. "I get so muddled, sometimes, and his lordship gets so cross. The other day I said, charmingly, to Amelia St. Albans, who is Great-Aunt Sophy's third daughter's daughter, 'I met your father Wednesday last.' But it came out I had met, not the husband of Amelia's mother, but her aunt Georgeanna's husband. Which might not be so bad, except that the *on dit* is that Georgeanna's husband *was* Amelia's father. Is that clear?"

"Her uncle was her father," synopsized Nancy placidly.

"They say so. But of course they don't say so to Amelia, only I did, only I didn't mean to. But Amelia was embarrassed, and I was embarrassed, and his lordship gave me *such* a look."

Pausing for breath, Susan allowed Nancy to apply the hare's foot at the point of her cheekbone, and sat still for the attaching of a patch. She thought back to the scene she had been describing. She had been up with Courtney in his curricle, the maroon one that had so lately been repaired. She had been doing her best to be all that was pleasing, and Courtney had been in quite tolerable spirits

until she had committed the gaffe with Amelia St. Albans. Then his face had taken on an expression of distaste and fatigue. As they continued on their rounds, his preoccupation increased, and by the time they returned to Grosvenor Square, he made no attempt to hide the fact that he had become monumentally bored. He went out, and never came home for dinner.

But this night, Susan told herself, he would surely be home. Though she had not seen him all day, she had made sure with Gustaf that he remembered they were to go out for dinner. It was Susan's first really formal affair, the first ball of the season. She had a new dress—yet another new dress—for the occasion. It hung, newly pressed, from her wardrobe door, a vision of moonlight, palest silvery silk. As she admired its reflection in her glass, there came Courtney's characteristic tap on her door. This was purely pro forma, since he never waited for an answer, but always came in at the same time as he was knocking.

He was in riding clothes, but seemed pleased to find that Susan was already dressing for the evening. He hated to be kept waiting.

"Carson," he said, scrutinizing Susan's face, "you'll have to do better than that. This is to be *grande tenue*, you know."

Nancy bobbed her head. "Her ladyship . . ." she began.

"She wanted to paint me like a China doll," broke in Susan, "but I made her give it up. I looked a fright!"

"Of course," said Courtney. "But you must look a fashionable fright. Now then, Carson, you must add rather more of the white, and less of the cream-color. The cream is more natural, of course, but less correct. Here . . ."

He dipped his beautifully manicured fingers into the cosmetic pot, and smeared the newly blended paste over Susan's face and neck. She dared not object.

"A little less eyebrow, my dear, and no nasty lines about the mouth. Would you like me to immortalize that frown? Carson, the patch must go. I have ruined it; didn't like it anyway." Nancy disposed of the pasty blob of

velvet. "Now for the delicate blush of youth..."

Susan looked at herself in the mirror, and put out her tongue.

"I'll admit," said Courtney, "it's a bit garish in this light, but you won't find it too much, I promise you. I have no intention of presenting you to the world as a strumpet, or a bumpkin."

Susan's real blush was invisible under the artificial one.

"Now the mouth. Open. No, not like a hungry chick, like a woman, about to be kissed."

He leaned forward, and for a moment it seemed he would suit the action to the word, but then he drew back and applied lip rouge with his littlest finger. Susan thought for the hundredth time of their first night at Queen's Crown as husband and wife, and for the hundredth time she wondered how long it would be before Courtney came to her bed again. It had occurred to her that she had offended him, and she had once tried to apologize, but he had not seemed offended, only bored. The subject had not come up again.

"Now, then, Carson, tighten those laces, will you?"

"But I can't breathe, already!" cried Susan.

"Breathing," said Courtney, "has never been considered a fashionable necessity. Swell out your chest. That's the limit, is it, Carson?"

Nancy, pulling with all her might, nodded.

"I feel sick," said Susan.

Courtney relented. "No need to get trussed up just yet; we've an hour before we must go. But Carson, not an inch less than the maximum."

With this admonishment, he left the room, to get dressed himself, a procedure scarcely less elaborate than it was for Susan. In fact, the only simplifications seemed to be that he could wear somewhat less paint, and that he was not obliged to negotiate miles of petticoats. But his garments were no less rich, no less ornate, and no easier to carry off well. His silk stockings with their tiny salmon-colored clocks had to be perfectly straight; his buff satin breeches had to be creaseless; his matching satin coat had to hang just so, not quite meeting over the salmon

waistcoat embellished with seed pearls. And of course the heavy lace that covered his hands to the knuckles and accented his throat had to be spotless, so once he was dressed he would touch nothing that could be suspected of carrying dust or dirt.

He met Susan in the hall outside her door, and together they went downstairs, their stately progress a sort of practice for what was to come. Susan bumped her wig against the frame of the carriage as she was getting in, and was nearly ready to cry at this inauspicious beginning, but Courtney smiled at her in a half humorous, half kindly way, and helped her to set the ponderous creation right again. He also readjusted her decollete until it was, in Susan's opinion, just barely decent. He said that was the way it should be.

As they traveled through the night streets, Susan peered out at the runners who accompanied the coach, torches held high. By the flickering light, she could see the stone and brick facades of anonymous houses, and an occasional watchman's box with its somnolent Charley. After a drive of some twenty minutes, they swept between square gateposts, up a short semicircular drive, and stopped in front of a low but impressive marble stair as the coach before them pulled away. Seeing only the back of the woman who had just alighted, clad in a somber, discreet black domino, Susan had a momentary fear of being horribly overdressed.

As soon as she entered the foyer, however, this fear evaporated. Milling about were dozens of figures arrayed in the most luxurious, if not always the most tasteful, costumes she could imagine. Silks, satins, tulles and gauzes, brilliant lengths of cloth-of-silver and cloth-of-gold, embroideries, appliques, damasks and brocades—every sort of fabric was displayed to adorn the body and dazzle the eye. And everywhere glittered jewels, from somber jet and understated onyx to great glassy diamonds and other precious stones. Susan had no way of knowing how many were hired, or how many were paste, or at what cost or by what shabby ruses they had been acquired. But she did know that her own rubies could

match anything in the room in quality, and exceeded a great many jewels in elegance. She put up her head and walked forward with confidence on Lord Courtney's arm.

Their hostess was a venerable plump woman in a startling shade of mauve. At the footman's announcement of the Earl of Courtney and Lady Lakewood Courtney, she evinced signs of lively curiosity, whispering to a wispy young woman standing near her. The young woman murmured a reply. Lady Marchbanks exhaled a smile and extended her hand.

"My dear Lady Lakewood," she effused, squinting short-sightedly, "I have been dying to meet you."

Lady Rayne's brother's second wife, Susan reminded herself—married in his dotage—expect eccentricities.

"Hunter, you desperate creature," said Lady Marchbanks. "Kiss me. I haven't been kissed by a handsome man since... Well, I daren't say."

Courtney dutifully grazed the painted purple cheek with his lightly rouged lips.

"So you have taken on the task of domesticating this degenerate, have you, my dear? Well, don't expect too much. I remember his father. But how is your father, my love? What a dreadful man. I'm sure he prospers. The wicked always do. For 'the ways of heaven are dark and intricate, our understanding traces them in vain.' Mr. Addison, you know, dear. A much maligned gentleman. But then, how many are!"

Another guest arrived at this point, and Lady Marchbanks's attention drifted off. Susan tried to remember in what ways Mr. Addison had been maligned.

"Don't mind her," murmured Courtney. "She's a bit loony. But then, how many are!"

He chuckled, and guided Susan toward a knot of people near a window. They all looked up.

"Here's Beaumont," said Courtney. "You'll want to meet him. Zoe's intended."

Susan bowed and smiled, and offered her hand. The man was tall, with a very formal bearing. He saluted Susan gravely. She wondered that Zoe, with her fine, breezy manners, should have chosen such a formidable

man. Susan immediately made comparison with the Comte do Monteuil, whom she knew to have been at Zoe's feet. It occurred to her to wonder how he had taken the news of Zoe's engagement, published only a few days before. His Grace of Alvers had certainly not approved of Zoe's brother's wedding, but Lord Stephen had stood up for himself in a manner which left no doubt in the old Duke's mind that he would marry the Lady Zoe Huntingdale or no one, and, after a certain amount of grumbling, Alvers had given his consent.

"Good steady sort," said Courtney, as they moved on, "but rather a stick. Not much love lost between us, I'm afraid. Still, if Zoe likes him, he must be right enough. Ah, here's Gerry!"

Courtney brightened at the sight of his cousin, and before ten minutes had passed, Susan found she had been neatly palmed off on the good-natured young man, who seemed to show no reluctance at squiring her about. For some time, she responded politely to greetings, and skated with increasing adroitness through new introductions. If Courtney was not there to steer her clear of possible faux pas, neither was she so likely to make them out of nervousness and the fear of vexing him. Susan laughed and chattered and enjoyed herself, and the worst that could be said of her was that she was artless. She was beginning to be almost glad Courtney had deserted her, when she noticed his elegant figure across the room. He stood with one white hand resting flower-like on a table top, the other gesturing gracefully.

Susan touched Gerald's arm.

"Who is that woman?"

He followed her gaze, then asked banteringly, "The stout one with the blue hair, or the willowy one with the bosom?"

Discreetly, Susan said, "Both."

"The stout one," he told her, "is Mrs. Howard Harrison, a hostess of repute. Her husband is the Member for a borough which, if not actually rotten, is certainly mouldering. Anyone who is interested in politics would do well to court her. The other is the Lady Heather

Clarke, widow of a maritime company millionaire, whom she married to revive the moribund family fortune. Her family—Maulsing—despised him, of course, but he got his own back: tied his fortune up in Heather exclusively." He laughed. "She holds the whip hand, does Heather."

So that is the woman, thought Susan. I'd have known her for his mistress anywhere. Rich and beautiful. She is beautiful, such sloping shoulders, such a long neck, and classical profile. And a cat, Isabel had said. Susan could believe that too, seeing the smile she gave Courtney, and the barely-veiled, mocking glance she threw Susan's way.

Gerald changed the subject, and chattered cheerfully while Susan feigned interest. She went on feigning interest until she had quite forgotten that she was feigning it. She had another few glasses of wine. Gerald volunteered to take her in to dinner, but at the last moment Courtney materialized, and did so himself. Several people commented, for it was not at all the custom for gentlemen to take their wives in to dinner, but, smiled sentimental older women, it was charming that Courtney should be so attentive to his bride.

He did not remain so, however, after supper. He disappeared, and Susan continued to circulate until one of her acquaintance suggested the gaming tables in the salon upstairs. Intending only to spectate, Susan went up to a large, well-lit room full of tables, chairs, and people—some laughing, some intent, some with cards in their hands, others dicing on square tables covered with green baize. There was a great deal of noise, and every once in a while an ineffectual snarl for silence from someone down on his luck.

Susan knew nothing of dicing; hazard was a mystery to her. At cards, though she knew only the barest rudiments of whist and was intimidated by the high stakes at faro, she was proficient at loo and beggar-my-neighbor. After a time, she was persuaded to sit down at a table. At first fortune smiled on her, but as time went on, her thoughts became muddled by the wine and the clamor, and she began to feel she was not doing very well. She realized that her losses, even at relatively low stakes, were mounting

up. She continued to play, however, with the gambler's firm conviction that a return of fortune would come in the next hand. She recouped occasionally. At one point, Courtney leaned over her shoulder, cautioned her against staking her rubies, laughed, and passed on. It was left to Lord Stephen, who stopped by some half an hour later, to find her in real distress. Her whole ambition now was to cut her losses and leave. With a sharp glance at one of her opponents, Lord Stephen sat down at the table, and from that point, Susan's luck turned. She played carefully and steadily, and after about an hour of exhausting work, she had made good most of her loss. With relief, she left the table. Lord Stephen accompanied her for some refreshment.

"One cannot be too careful," he said, "who one plays cards with. Gaming is a serious business to some of these people."

"It will be so to me, too, from now on!" Susan averred. "For a time, just before you joined us, I thought I should come out very badly indeed."

"Whole estates have passed back and forth across the tables, Lady Lakewood. Men—and women—may gain or lose thousands in a night. And there are always those who prey upon the inexperienced."

"You mean I was being gulled? I daresay I was. Sir Cecil was a very clever player."

"Some say, too clever."

"You mean he was cheating?" cried Susan.

"I should never say so. But then, I should never play with him, either."

"And yet you played to get me out of a scrape. You are very kind, Lord Stephen."

He bowed. "I should simply advise you, madam, never to play at cards with a man who is known to live well and seems to have no other source of income."

Susan smiled, and it occurred to her that if Lord Stephen was a stick, he was a very nice one.

After bringing her a glass of ratafia, Lord Stephen called for Susan's carriage to be brought round, and, having assured her that it was in no way remarkable for

her to be going home alone, sent her gratefully off. Then he returned to the party with the intention of seeking Courtney out, and letting him know just what his opinion was of the way he looked after his young wife.

But Lord Courtney was not to be found. He was in the nether reaches of the garden, a great deal more drunk than sober, spouting nonsense to Lady Heather Clarke, who laughed at him.

"You are absurd, my dear Hunter. I'm sure it is a pretty conceit you are trying to formulate, but it was not Leda who was the swan; it was Zeus. Surely you are not to tell me I am like Zeus?"

"Certainly not. But Leda must have been a very beautiful, swan-like woman, or why should Zeus have assumed the shape of a swan to seduce her?"

"I think you are hopelessly muddled, my dear."

"Very likely," said Hunter. "I shall call on you tomorrow. Shall you be in?"

Lady Heather regarded him speculatively. "I am undecided."

When Courtney, looking debonair and very handsome with a natural flush on his cheeks and a glitter of excitement in his eyes, presented himself at the door to Lady Heather's town house next day at half-past three, he was admitted to the salon by a maid who smiled at him familiarly. But he waited for a full half an hour before she reappeared and told him he might go upstairs. Then he made his way to a room on the first floor, at the back of the house. It was a lady's boudoir, feminine, cool, elegant, furnished entirely in shades of white. The carpet was a deep, rich cream, with patterns in shadowed ivory which reflected the play of white on white in the damask draperies. The furniture was painted white, with occasional gilt trim, and there was a pair of fruitwood armchairs thickly upholstered in pearly silk. Through a half-opened door to one side could be seen a large bed, hung with white satin, and Courtney knew the sheets were satin too. He shivered involuntarily, remembering how delicious they felt against the skin. He went to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of claret.

He had ensconced himself comfortably in one of the upholstered chairs, and was gazing dreamily into space, when Lady Heather appeared. Light-footed, she came up behind him and posed beside her dressing table before she spoke. Her hair was slightly mussed, her gown *en negligée* looked as though it had been donned in haste. Of course it had not, as Courtney would know perfectly well, but all the same, the illusion was effective.

He swung round in his chair.

"I cannot imagine why I consented to receive you," she said. "Perhaps I shall only torture you and then send you home to your pretty little wife."

"From you," smiled Courtney, "even torture would be a pleasure."

He raised his glass to her. She came and stood between his knees.

"You are drinking already?"

"My dear! My first glass of the day."

"Then what can account for the look on your face? Have you been thinking of me?" She advanced one leg. "I think you have."

"I don't deny it."

"But Hunter, you have treated me shamefully. I must punish you. I am the laughingstock of London."

"Impossible. London adores you."

"I think," said Heather, caressing his thigh with hers, "I shall bring you to an intolerable state of excitement, and then show you to the door."

"You were never one to neglect your own satisfaction, my love."

Heather smiled. "There are plenty of men in this house, my darling. You have not, perhaps, made the acquaintance of my new footman, Richard. His attributes are... considerable."

"More considerable than mine?"

"Considerably."

Courtney laughed. "Heather, you're a whore."

"You love it," said Heather.

"Damme, I do. Seduce me, darling. I am on fire for you."

Adroitly, she loosened his clothing. His head fell back against the silken upholstery, and his eyes closed.

"Kiss me."

She tickled his ear, and pinched him softly under the chin, and raked his belly with her fingernails. He moaned.

"Kiss me, kiss me."

But she didn't. When he opened his eyes, he found she had contrived to strip to a transparent shift. The negligee lay in a heap on the floor. Her hair tumbled golden and riotous about her shoulders. When he reached for her, she stepped back.

"Oh, God, no!" he pleaded, as she went to ring the servants' bell. "You can't send me away, Heather; you can't."

"Oh, but I can."

He groaned.

"But I have not yet decided whether I shall. I have simply sent for Richard."

"The footman? What for?"

"For you, if you like. Richard is versatile."

Like many another sophisticated hedonist, Courtney had tried just about everything, and in his time he had enjoyed the charms of a skilled and beautiful boy, but his preference was most decidedly for women. Still, the prospect of a threesome was not without its attractions. When the door opened, Courtney looked the wiry young footman over quite thoroughly.

"He is very handsome, Heather," was his judgement.

"I think so. Richard, my love, do you find his lordship handsome?"

The footman's gaze was as cool as Courtney's had been.

"Yes, my lady, very handsome."

"How agreeable we all are," remarked Courtney drily.

Heather, disheveled and nearly naked, held both men's eyes as she crossed the room to the windows. She loosened the cords that held back the curtains, and then brought the cords to Richard, who took them silently.

"Richard, will you be good as to secure his lordship's arms?"

Courtney started. What was this, some sort of a game? He had no objection to games, but he liked to know what they were.

"By your lordship's leave," said Richard, with a bow.

He removed Courtney's coat and waistcoat, but made no demur when he seemed reluctant to part with his shirt. He then looped a white satin cord about each of Courtney's wrists, and tied them lightly together behind his back.

"Heather, what the hell are you playing at?" Courtney's laugh was nonchalant, but he was beginning to feel a little nervous.

With a wicked grin, Heather took the loose ends of the curtain cords, and led him into the bedroom. She then directed Richard to lay bare the satin sheets, which he did, while she stripped Lord Courtney until he stood naked before her, except for his fine lawn shirt. He was nervous and excited at the same time.

"Lie down, darling," whispered Heather.

He lay down on the bed, as directed, on his back, with his head on the satin pillow. Richard, without being told to, secured first one wrist then the other to the bedpost.

My God, he remembered suddenly, she said she was going to punish me. And I have put myself completely in her power, thinking this was one of her delectable charades. But neither of these people would inflict upon me any indignity I strenuously object to. They wouldn't dare!

"Heather," he said, with a note of warning in his voice.

Heather ignored him.

"Darling Richard," she murmured. "You are so clever."

She came into the footman's embrace, while Courtney looked on, incredulous. The bitch! Richard, enjoying himself thoroughly, returned his mistress's caresses with increasing ardor.

"Bitch!" yelled Hunter, as the pair progressed to obscenities. His lust flared again, raging over his body, almost unbearably intensified. And yet, one corner of his brain remained cool enough to appreciate the exquisite

justice of it: Heather was not going to do something to him, she was going to do nothing to him. He would watch helplessly while she sated herself with another man. It was brilliant; it was intolerable. He screamed and swore, and finally Heather led the footman from the room, with a backward glance full of triumph. She knew Courtney would have to have her again, many times, before his pride would be avenged.

Susan, at home in her private sitting room which overlooked the square, was mapping out a program of activities and self-improvements that would have satisfied the heat of an ambitious mama with three energetic and intelligent daughters to educate. Lady Lakewood had found that she was not to take over any of the housekeeping duties—Cole, the butler, seemed to do all that—and so she was to have little to do but entertain herself. She fully intended to do this, in the most constructive way possible. She made appointments to visit picture galleries and sculpture galleries; she decided to learn to paint in watercolors; she signed herself up to attend a series of poetry readings. She planned to read and discuss beforehand all the plays that were to be staged during the season. She engaged tutors in several subjects.

M. de Monteuil complained gallantly, at tea, "Madame is to be so much occupied, she will be obliged to drop all her friends."

"Of course not. I shall have loads of friends." Susan balanced a pansy-sprinkled limoges cup in one hand, and took a cake with the other. "I shall have watercolor-painting friends, and picture-gallery friends, and poetical friends, and all the rest of it."

Lady Marchbanks, seated ponderously by the window, wondered if it was not perhaps true that the first flush of rapture had speedily worn off young Courtney's marriage.

"But," Susan went on, "have you forgotten, Monty? You promised me a French tutor. I shall want him Tuesday and Thursday mornings, for one hour. I hope also to find a music master for those days."

"Not an easy task," put in Amelia St. Albans from the

settee. "My music master is exasperating. He tells me I am doing marvelous well, when even the parlormaid can tell I am flat." She laughed. "But his predecessor was even worse. He would fly into a fury whenever I made a mistake, and I made so many, I vow I think giving me lessons endangered his health!"

Everyone laughed, and several polite comments were made, to the effect that Miss St. Albans made too little of her quite considerable talent.

"Does milady desire to sing," asked Monteuil, "or to play an instrument?"

"Oh, I think voice lessons would be enough, just at first."

"In that case, I could recommend to you, Madame, an excellent music master from France. You might combine your French lessons and your music."

"How clever you are, Monty!" cried Susan. "What a capital idea. I should learn to sing lovely French songs. French songs are quite my favorite."

There was a round of requests for Susan to sing a French song. She objected that she didn't know any. Monteuil volunteered to give her her first lesson himself. Laughing and protesting, Susan went with Monteuil to the piano, with a young man named Everard, an admirer of Amelia's, to accompany. When the French song had been gone through once or twice, they turned to English ballads. Amelia was persuaded to join in. The whole company was soon enlisted to sing in parts, and having a wonderful time. This had been going on for quite some time when someone noticed that Courtney had come in and was watching from the doorway, his hands in his pockets, his eyes cool and clear.

"Come, join us, Hunter!" cried Amelia. "We are short a baritone for this piece, and we have had poor Lady Marchbanks singing contralto."

"Poor Lady Marchbanks!" smiled Courtney.

Now that the room was quiet, the chime of the mantle clock rang out quite clearly, and as it did so it prompted a flurry of activity and exclamations of "Oh, the time! I had no idea!" and departures. When all the goodbyes had been said, Susan offered Courtney some leftover tea.

"Or I can ring for fresh, of course?"

He said no, he wasn't in a mood for tea, but he did sit down and devour the remaining cakes and crumpets. He listened to a recital of Susan's plans for her own edification, and seemed to approve.

"Between times," he added, sitting back and looking at the large, dark furnishings, "you might want to redo this room. It was all very well for Her La'ship, but it's not your style at all, do you think?"

Susan was ecstatic.

"I *hate* this room!"

It contained some very fine pieces of Dutch cabinetry, rare Belgian carpets, and a mirror that had belonged to Frederick the Great. It was a fine period room, and both the choice and arrangement of the pieces showed sophistication and erudition. But it just so happened that Susan hated the period, and she hated the Germanic character of the pieces. She was thrilled at the chance to pitch it all out.

Emboldened, she asked, "Do you think, perhaps, I might do just a bit with my other rooms, too, the bedroom, and the dressing room?"

"Of course, if you don't like them. Why didn't you say so?"

The bedroom was regally French; the dressing room was Italianate, with bits of prize Venetian glass about and a black marble clock that Susan thought was fit to chime the passing of the hours at a wake.

"I'm sure they're very fine rooms," she hazarded, "but, as you say, not quite in my style." A thought struck her, and she sparkled. "You think I have a style, then?"

"Of course you have a style, darling. Quite a charming style, too, as I think your friends would agree. They seemed to be enjoying themselves thoroughly."

"Well, they will enjoy themselves much more when I have got these beastly black chests out of here!" declared Susan, exhilarated.

In the next week, she cajoled Courtney into going with her on several expeditions to furniture warehouses. Once they had settled on a given style, he had certain

Restoration pieces transported from Queen's Crown, and several times Susan came home to find a new table or a small chair which he had bought or otherwise acquired from a friend. In the meantime, there were catalogs to be gone over, and draperies and upholstery, and wall paint and carpeting to be chosen. It was decided that the sitting room should be painted blue-violet, with cream-colored mouldings. The dressing room was to have white walls, and dadoes painted in a dusty shade of rose, like the hangings in the bedroom, where the wallpaper also had accents of rose. It was a color which Courtney had once admired on Susan; he didn't remember the occasion, but she did. A pair of Savonneries were discovered in the hands of a dealer in Cheapside, and several bolts of fashionable floral chintz came in from France. Susan loved the bustle and the busyness, and she pulled Courtney into it whenever she could. He seemed to enjoy it too, and a sense of camaraderie blossomed.

Still, he was much occupied in amusing himself with sports and companions that Susan did not share. Still, he was sometimes short and irritable when she made a mistake or failed in some way to live up to his exacting standards, which she was just beginning to comprehend. And still, he never came to her bedroom. But Susan felt that their relationship was steadily improving, and that that particular problem would sooner or later resolve itself. I am his wife, she thought; I shall produce his heir.

But whenever Susan chanced to meet Lady Heather Clarke—which she did as seldom as possible—whenever she saw the statuesque figure across the room or heard the breathy, insinuating voice, Susan's stomach tied itself in knots. She tried to console herself with the perennial conviction of the faithful wife: he must come back to me, for I am good and she is evil. But it was not much consolation for the lonely nights and the feeling of being something less than a woman. Susan was wretchedly jealous. And though she did her best to hide it, it all came out one evening at Vauxhall, just before the Garden closed for the season.

It happened that Susan was standing in a group with

her husband when Lady Heather approached. Susan's first instinct was to go away, but as she made an effort to drift to one side, she found that Courtney had put his arm inconspicuously around her waist. There was no way she could discreetly disengage herself, so she had to stay where she was. Lady Heather joined the circle briefly, spoke a word or two to everyone, gave Courtney a lazy smile, and passed on. Susan fought down her butterflies bravely, and thought she had acquitted herself pretty well, but a little bit later she found herself strolling alone with Courtney, and not by coincidence.

"It seems you find it difficult to be polite to Lady Heather Clarke," he commented. "Why is that? You know she is a particular friend of mine."

"I... I... She makes me nervous. She is so... grand."

"I think there is more to it than that. I am aware that there is gossip."

It is he who should be put out of countenance, not I, thought Susan defensively. But she was so flustered, she could barely reply.

"Yes, there is... gossip..." All at once she found her tongue. "But I have no need of gossips to tell me what is between you! The way she looks at you—the way she looks at me—the way everybody looks at *us*! Do you take me for quite a fool?"

Susan blinked back tears. She didn't mean to cry. She wasn't sad; she was angry.

"The way she looks, the way everybody looks," he repeated. "What about the way I look?"

"You?" She thought about it. After a moment she admitted, "You always appear quite correct with her."

But what does that matter, if the gossips and Lady Heather's smiles speak the truth? she protested silently. Is morality merely a question of appearances?

But Courtney said no more on the subject, and Susan did not pose her questions. They merely strolled in silence for a few minutes more, and then returned to the Rotunda, to their party. And Susan continued to feel sick and sullen whenever Lady Heather happened her way.

# *IX*

Lady Lakewood became quite adept, however, at avoiding her rival, and if this meant that she also found herself avoiding her husband—well, it was a price she was willing to pay. It was not that he was much with Lady Heather, herself, but they both belonged to a set that was just too much for Susan. They stayed up too late, drank too much, played too deep. She didn't understand half of their jokes, and those she did understand embarrassed her. And she had the uncomfortable feeling that, though they were always polite, in their breezy fashion, they really found her more than a little amusing. So Susan left them alone, for the most part, and kept to her own friends.

She also missed her family very much. She wrote to them frequently, and received prompt, enthusiastic responses, but she was distressed to find that, as she, no doubt, grew increasingly worldly, they came to seem increasingly dull and provincial. What, for instance, would sister Meg think of her new negligee, a sheer lavender tulle that fell in folds and gathers revealing the shape of her legs? And what would Mama think of the perfectly respectable custom of receiving gentlemen in such a garb, for breakfast, perhaps, or just for a chat while Nancy did her nails or the hairdresser did her hair? At least, thought Susan, musical Lucy would have to approve of M. Piquart, in spite of his frills and bows and buckles and his florid gallicisms, for he was an exceptional music master. As she signed and sanded her letter, Susan smiled at M. Piquart, who sat politely waiting for her to begin her day's lesson.

It was not till much later in the day that she saw Courtney, for the first time since yesterday—or was it the day before? He caught her arm as she was flying down the steps, pinning on her hat.

"Ah, Countess! What a pleasant surprise. I declare, you are looking quite well."

"Oh, Hunter, I am frightfully late. I promised Amelia to be at tea not a moment later than four, and here it is half-past!"

"No time even for a greeting?" he said. His voice was light, but there was a certain tightness about his mouth. "Perhaps milady could be prevailed upon to do me the honor of dining at home tonight?"

"At home?" Susan was taken by surprise. She hadn't dined at home in a week, and Courtney hadn't dined at home in longer than that. "With you? Of course!" She gave a dazzling smile. "I'm sure it will be delightful, my lord."

His eyes twinkled, and his mouth relaxed.

"Madam, I think you are becoming a sad flirt."

Susan flicked open her fan and simpered behind it. She batted her eyelids outrageously.

"Oh, my lord, you are too severe!"

Courtney laughed.

"Wait, I know! Miss—oh, what's her name? The one with the bolster-bosomed mama and the frizzled coppery hair. She holds her fan in just that revoltingly affected way."

With a giggle that was about equal parts silliness and satire, Susan ran out the door.

When she returned, Courtney was no longer in the house, but she found that dinner had been ordered for eight o'clock, for two only. She went up to her room feeling absurdly excited, and took a bath. She wished she might wear her new negligee, for even Gerry had said it was vastly becoming, and Gerry never flattered. But of course it was not the sort of thing one could wear to dinner. Susan thought wistfully that if she and Courtney were on better terms, she might order dinner brought up to her sitting room, which had recently been completed in

the new style and was now quite her favorite room in the house. But of course they were not on such intimate terms, she reminded herself, putting the lavender negligee out of her mind. She settled on a wine-red gown of crepe-de-Chine. It was not brand new, but it was becoming, and it looked well with her rubies.

As she dressed, Susan listened and listened for Courtney to come in, and had nearly concluded, despairing, that he had forgotten, before she heard his step in the hall. He went directly to his own room, and appeared for dinner precisely on time. It was a wonder to Susan that though he often cut time to the shortest, and never rushed, he was never late for anything. He sauntered downstairs just as the hall clock struck eight. Within moments, Cole materialized to announce that dinner was served.

It was a delightful dinner. The food was good and, as Courtney preferred it, rather plain. Conversation flowed freely. Courtney was witty and entertaining; Susan found she had a great many things to tell him, and ask his opinion of, and he seemed interested in all of them. But it did seem there was a specific reason for this tête-á-tête, as Susan discovered halfway through her lamb in wine sauce.

"I had a letter from Zoe today," said Courtney. "She will be in Town in a few days."

As it happened, Susan had heard this from Lord Stephen at tea, but she looked tolerably surprised.

"How charming. Does she make her home with us?" The thought was a bit unsettling, but appealing, too.

"With us? No, she has her own establishment, in Queen Street. I did think, however, we might consider having some sort of entertainment in her honor. A betrothal party, or what have you."

Susan felt a thrill of pleasure. The thought of standing up beside Lord Courtney, in his own drawing room, as hostess, was immensely satisfying.

"What sort of entertainment?" she asked. "A drum? A rout? A musical event?"

Courtney shrugged.

"That is for you to decide. But as it will be your first party, I should advise against anything excessively ambitious. Perhaps twenty, for dinner. I think the table will take as many as twenty-four. Cole, will this table seat twenty-four?"

The butler was of the opinion that, although his lordship had not previously invited more than eighteen to dine, the table would seat twenty-four.

"Well, the details can be settled later. But we shall plan on having a dinner for Lady Zoe, shall we?"

"Of course," said Susan, her eyes bright.

They settled upon a date early in October, barely a week away, and Susan's head began to swim as she thought of all the things that would have to be done before then. She hoped they might sit for a while over a cordial and discuss the subject further, but almost as soon as he had done eating, Courtney announced that he was expected at a friend's for a round or two of cards.

"Do you go out?" he asked Susan. "Shall I have the carriage put to?"

"Yes," said Susan. She had imagined he was to spend the evening with her, and was bitterly disappointed. But she was too proud to say she intended to spend the evening at home alone. She would go somewhere, even if it was only for a drive in the carriage, so Courtney would not imagine she had nothing to do.

"I'm off to Chelsea," she said airily. "Can I drop you on the way?"

Though he was only going as far as Brook Street, barely round the corner, Courtney accepted the offer.

In the carriage he asked, "Whereabouts in Chelsea are you going?"

Susan blushed in the darkness and stammered, "I... um, to Lady Beauchamp's."

As the carriage drew up in Brook Street, he drew her suddenly into his arms and kissed her.

"Be careful," he said. "The city is alive with cheats, and bounders."

Susan murmured something incoherent, in her surprise, and then said, "Oh, you mean footpads? I shall

keep to the main roads."

"Yes, darling," he replied, his voice quite different. "Footpads. That's what I mean."

With a little laugh that seemed to Susan not very humorous, he released her, and got out. He also ordered the coachman to Lady Beauchamp's, which was all right with Susan, since one evening drive was much the same to her as another. The carriage proceeded to Hyde Park Corner, and thence down Knightsbridge Road and Brompton Road to Lady Beauchamp's rather charming, nearly countrified house in large grounds. Susan was relieved to see that she was in fact having some sort of party. Carriages rolled up to the door in a steady stream. Susan allowed the coachman to join it, and then, as a footman approached the carriage door, she told the coachman she had changed her mind, and would like to be taken home. It was all a rather silly charade, she thought, and went to bed decidedly out of sorts. She lay awake for a long time, and slept only fitfully for a long time after that. By three o'clock, when Courtney had still not come in, she got up and took a sleeping draught, and finally went to sleep, with visions of Lady Heather's self-assured little smiles dancing before her eyes.

In the morning, however, Courtney was home. When he came in to breakfast, Susan, partly to mask the extent of her emotion, partly out of genuine ebullience, began immediately to pelt him with questions about the party for Zoe. Together, they drew up a guest list. The name of Lady Heather was not mentioned. As to the matter of decorations, Susan's imagination ran riot. Courtney spent some time in squelching her more extravagant notions. No, he would not contrive to recreate the Doge's palace, nor would he countenance a Voyage to Cythera, nor Mount Olympus.

"Mount Olympus! Good God, do you envision a forest of papier mache columns in the Ionic style? You should be mistress of the Pantheon, or some public dance hall!"

Susan squeaked indignantly.

"Style, Susan, where's your sense of style? I'm sure you have one. That dress, now—did I pick that out?"

"No, I did." She brightened. "Do you like it?"

"Very much. It has flair and taste. But these fanciful flights of yours—I'll grant them *flair* . . ."

"Well, what about flowers? Surely flowers cannot fail to be tasteful."

"What sort of flowers?"

"Masses of 'em. Springtime!"

Courtney sighed. "Susan, all anybody will really care about is whether the food is good and there is plenty of wine."

Susan sighed. "Very well. But one day I shall have a party all of London will talk about—a visit to the tent of the Sheik of Araby, or an Evening in the Persian Paradise."

"I take it back," muttered Courtney. "Not a dance hall, a *maison de joie*."

"Oh, don't be spiteful!" cried Susan. "And don't be so old and stuffy!"

To her surprise, he threw back his head and laughed.

"By damn! Well, don't bite my head off, child. You may do as you like with this party, but I warn you, it will be the making or the breaking of you as a hostess."

Upon reconsideration, Susan opted for restraint, and decided to go ahead with her most conservative plan. She called in half a dozen florists for consultation.

"Daffodils, my lady?"

"Daisies, my lady?"

"Hyacinths?"

"My lady, it is *autumn*!"

But Susan determined that spring flowers could be found, in greenhouses in forced bloom, and could be bought, for a staggering sum. Courtney had given her carte blanche, however, and Susan intended to do her very best. She ordered the flowers.

Zoe arrived in town on a Tuesday, some three days before the party, and called in the afternoon. She professed herself delighted with the plans, charmed by the flower scheme, in complete agreement with the choice of musicians. The guest list she had already reviewed. Susan breathed easier, and though Cole was still somewhat

disapproving of her decorations, she trusted to the butler's rather ponderous pride to make sure that all went smoothly.

Courtney himself seemed unperturbed. On the day of the party, he came downstairs, gave the topsy-turvy drawing room one desultory glance, and vanished for the rest of the day. Susan oversaw the installation of vases and vases of tulips, and jonquils, purple flags and lilies of the valley, and then escaped, thanking God Courtney had gone before he saw the florists' bills. Cole was left to deal with innumerable remaining details, which he did with efficiency and precision, so that when Susan came in from tea, and Courtney from White's Club, everything was in perfect readiness. Everything gleamed and sparkled, and the scent of spring was everywhere. Cole looked like the cat that swallowed the canary.

"My God," murmured Courtney, touching the petals of a peony with something like awe, "it's beautiful!"

Susan capered silently behind his back, then glided past and went upstairs. By the time she had dressed, her nerves were all aquiver. By the time Zoe arrived with Lord Stephen, she could barely keep from biting her nails to the quick, and was ready to strangle Courtney when he strolled into the drawing room looking perfectly serene.

"My love," he told Zoe, "you must not stir from that spot there by the iris. The blue is perfect with your dress, and your eyes."

Zoe laughed.

"Your wife is a genius, Lee. She has created a haven of enchantment in the October fog."

Courtney smiled, and said nothing. But Susan saw something in his face she had never seen before. He is proud of me, she thought. Really proud of me! Her nerves vanished as if they had never been, and the evening passed, for Susan, in a dream. The company was warm, witty, delightful; the food was delicious, the wine exquisite. Susan never had such a good time in her life.

At about one o'clock the company began to take its leave. At the last, the guests of honor went to take their departure, with M. de Monteuil and Gerald in their wake.

As Zoe stepped into Lord Stephen's carriage, Susan's eye chanced to wander to M. de Monteuil's face. There was something there that made her take his arm compassionately, and speak softly in his ear.

"Ger, what do you say to an hour at the tables in St. James's?" suggested Courtney, returning from the coach. "The night's young! Count, will you join us?"

Monteuil accepted the invitation. Gerald wandered off in search of a cab. Courtney called for his hat and his gloves. And Susan, her evening destroyed, stood rooted to the doorstep until they had gone. Then she went upstairs to Nancy, who undressed her, brushed her hair, and put her to bed. Alone, finally, she turned her face to the pillow, and cried as if her heart would break.

After I made such a brilliant success for him, she reflected bitterly, he leaves me on the doorstep like an unwanted parcel! I hate him!

She cried and cried, but it had been an exhausting day, and she had only so many tears to shed. After a while, despite her heartache, she fell asleep.

She started awake, hours later, to the sound of the front door being slammed. There were several strange noises in the vestibule below, then a sharp crack, followed by an even sharper oath and a husky shout.

"Susan!"

Jumping out of bed, taking only a moment to thrust her arms into the sleeves of her dressing gown and strike a light, she hurried out into the hall. What can have happened? she worried. She peered down the stairs, her taper aloft.

"Lee?"

Courtney stood unsteadily in the foyer, clutching his leg, swearing under his breath at the side table.

"Ah," he said, as he caught sight of his wife. He started up the steps three at a time, pulling himself along the bannister. Susan stared.

He stopped at the first landing, produced a silver flask, which he raised in salute, and then put to his lips. In an effort to extract one last drop, he tilted his head back farther and farther until Susan feared he might topple

down the stairs. Then, with a pained look, he chucked the empty vessel over his shoulder. It bumped twice along the balustrade and plummeted to the hall floor.

Susan continued to stare. She had never seen anyone, much less her elegant husband, in such a condition. His eyes drifted unnervingly, not quite coordinated. His coat was crumpled, and hung off one shoulder. His shirt was undone, his lace drooping to one side. His wig was gone, apparently abandoned.

He made a peculiar noise, halfway between a chortle and a hiccough.

"Li'l kitten face. Inquis'tive kitten face. So... pretty... Miss Whalley..."

The slurred voice trailed off as he reached the top of the stairs. He reached out a hand. Susan took it. He hauled her into his arms. He reeked of brandy, his clothes and hair stank of tobacco. His hands were rough; his kisses were sloppy. But Susan didn't care. He came home to me, she thought. He came home shouting my name.

Courtney took her to her own bedroom, knocking over a small chair in the hall, and banging the door. He fell into bed with her, calling her barely distinguishable pet names, and referring repeatedly to her father's house, to the copse by the little stream, to the green grass and the dappled light through the leaves overhead. But when his passion was spent, he seemed quite clearly aware that he was in Susan's bedroom, and took pains to go back to his own. He tripped again over the Louis XIV chair in the hall, and Susan heard him swear. She couldn't help but giggle. It had been a rather unsettling experience, all in all.

In the morning, when she went downstairs, she found that the silver flask had been removed from the hall carpet, and the Louis XIV chair taken away to be sent for repairs, several of the gilt roses having been knocked off. Susan tried to look blasé when Cole informed her of this, but she knew she was blushing furiously.

It was noon before Courtney appeared, walking very lightly on the balls of his feet. He was pale, and went paler when Susan asked if he wanted any breakfast.

When they were alone, he said to Susan, a bit

quizzically, "I believe I owe you an apology."

Susan looked down at her hands.

"Oh, it's all right."

"I... um... I..." It was the first time Susan had ever seen him at a loss for words.

"You were foxed."

He almost smiled. "Not to put too fine a gloss upon it, I was. I hope I didn't... hurt you."

Susan was having too much trouble keeping her countenance to catch the note of cautious inquiry in his voice.

"No," she said. She thought of her torn nightdress, but didn't think she need mention that. "No, I wasn't hurt."

"But you were embarrassed."

"Well, a little, perhaps."

"Well, I am sorry for it. And... while we are being candid..." He paused for a moment, and then said, "I think you should know that my relationship with Lady Heather Clarke is at an end."

The big brown eyes were no longer veiled, but were staring at him with a sort of fury. Courtney stared back, astonished. Then, before he could say anything more, Susan gathered up her skirts and rushed from the room.

# X

It was some days before Susan got over the shock of what she imagined to be Courtney's perfidy in coming straight from a quarrel with his mistress to her. But she did get over it. What was harder to accept was the fact that the entire episode seemed to have made no difference whatsoever in her relationship with her husband. He remained friendly but aloof, and never again alluded to the night of the party. Susan tried to throw herself back into her lessons and activities, but she found herself becoming depressed and tired and at times almost listless. She went, however, through the motions, and tried to keep her increasing fatigue a secret. She continued to accept all invitations, to be out most of the day and a large part of every night.

After a week or so, Nancy felt compelled to object.

"Your ladyship is burning the candle at both ends. You are pale and high-strung, and you can hardly drag yourself out of bed in the morning. If you ask me, your ladyship should be stopping at home tonight, not going off to another of those hot, crowded drums."

"But I didn't ask you, did I?" replied Susan snappishly, and immediately felt sorry.

She felt even sorrier when she got to the drum, for it was indeed very hot, and very crowded. She drank several glasses of wine to raise her spirits, and then promptly decided it had been too much, for the room began to spin before her eyes, her head felt light, and her stomach felt dreadful. She looked around half-heartedly for Courtney, and then, when she couldn't find him, confided in Lady Zoe that she felt very ill, and was going home. Zoe offered

to accompany her, but she said it was no matter, she had rather be alone, and she was sure all she needed was a little fresh air. Zoe, who didn't believe in pressing anyone, saw her to her carriage, and let her go.

As the horses trotted smartly over the cobbled street, Susan found she was feeling abominable. She called to the coachman to pull up, and go at a quiet walk. She rolled up her window, and the cool night air on her face rejuvenated her sufficiently to enjoy the drive. Trusting to the footmen's vigilance against possible robbers, she asked to be taken along the river to Westminster. The moon was full over the river. Susan loved the old houses that lined the ancient streets, and the dark spires of the Gothic state buildings silhouetted in angular patterns against the changing backdrop of the stars as the horses moved along. She lay back against the cushions, and very nearly dropped off to sleep.

It was some time before the carriage reached Grosvenor Square, traveling at such a leisurely pace. Susan felt much better by then, but as soon as she got out of the carriage, she knew that the respite had been only temporary. It was all she could do to get upstairs, leaning heavily on the arm of a footman. Nancy clucked and puttered and was all for bundling her immediately off to bed. The cook sent up a cooling draught, a minty concoction of which he was rather proud. Susan sipped it while Nancy brushed her hair over the back of the armchair in which she sprawled, white arms hanging limply, bare feet sticking out from under her petticoats towards the fire. At this point the door opened without ceremony and Courtney came in.

Susan struggled to sit up.

"My lord! You are home early. Did you not enjoy the party? I thought it quite delightful, if only I had not the headache."

She looked around for her dressing gown, which Nancy soon produced.

"I rather expected from Zoe to find you prostrated," said Courtney, "but they tell me below stairs that you have only just come in."

"Yes, I... I thought the night air might do me good, but I can't say that it did." She slumped in her chair again. "I feel beastly."

"Where did you go? Chelsea, perhaps?"

Susan gazed at him in surprise. The cold blue eyes raked her face, as if to elicit something deep and subtle from her expression. She looked away uncomfortably.

"Why do you say that? We came by way of Westminster. You know, the Houses of Parliament, and Whitehall, and the Abbey..."

"I am familiar," said Courtney, "with the public buildings of Westminster."

"Well, then, why do you quiz me? I suppose I may drive home by way of Westminster if I choose!"

"Of course you may."

Susan's defiance melted.

"Oh, Lee, don't be annoyed with me. I can't bear it. I do feel so ill."

She put up her arms in a childish gesture of need. As if he couldn't help himself, Courtney leaned over the chair and enfolded her close to his chest. They remained in that posture for some minutes, still and silent.

"Come, let me take you to bed," he said at last. "You really are unwell. Your forehead is burning."

"Oh, no. I am so comfortable here," she said, but soon found herself being hoisted out of the chair and carried into the bedroom.

"Damn, I have bust my coat. Well, no matter. Carson, take it away, if you will. You needn't come back. I shall valet her ladyship."

Back stiff with disapproval, Nancy went away.

Susan, however, suffered no hardship. She found herself very soon tucked up in a clean nightgown, her face fresh-bathed in tepid water, her hair lightly plaited over her shoulders.

"Good night, my pretty child. Sleep well," he said, and Susan was too ill and achy to wonder at his tone, or the gentleness of his lips against her cheek.

Courtney reappeared in the morning, at an unwonted hour, and, after chatting with Susan over her chocolate,

had a footman sent round for the doctor. Susan's protests that she didn't need a doctor, that she wasn't really ill, that a day's rest would surely put her to rights, were met with a sharp command not to be such a fool, and she subsided. Dr. Richardson turned out to be a spare, vigorous little man whose own obvious state of good health inspired confidence. He poked, and prodded, and asked a great many questions, and finally pronounced Susan's affliction to be no more serious than a case of influenza. Her ladyship should, he told her, feel like the end of the earth for two or three days, and then feel better but weak for another few days. She should, however, be feeling quite herself within a fortnight. Susan smiled, and thanked him. Dr. Richardson, she told Nancy, was quite a pleasant man, and she, Nancy, need not be afraid if ever she needed a doctor.

Once the first few days of terrible aches were over, Susan found that she was almost grateful for the enforced rest. After the whirlwind of activities she had plunged into in the past weeks, it was a relief to know each morning that she need do nothing at all that day but what pleased her. Courtney took to looking in, and taking chocolate with her. Afternoons, she often had visitors, but when she realized that Courtney made a point to take tea with her if she did not have visitors, she took to making sure her visitors left early. She would deck herself out in her lavender negligee, and wait to ring until she heard his step on the stair.

As she sat opposite him on her chaise, conversing quietly, it seemed to Susan that she remembered his always being present during the worst of her illness. Whenever she had asked for him, he had appeared immediately. He never seemed to be out, or unavailable. Nancy, when questioned, told her with first grudging signs of approval that his lordship had spent most of those three days in Susan's sitting room, writing letters or reading.

When Susan mentioned this, Courtney was brusque and offhand.

"You were ill. What did you expect me to do, go off to the races?"

Since this was pretty much what she would have expected, Susan made no reply. And she noticed that his face no longer had the same softness when he looked at her as it had when he would stand at the foot of her bed, leaning against the post, while Nancy sponged her forehead or brushed out her hair. But he did come to see her morning and evening, and Susan was grateful. Her convalescence was a happy one.

It was after two weeks, the time Dr. Richardson said it should take for her to regain her full strength, that Susan decided to come downstairs for dinner again, and next day she planned to go out for a drive. She was just discussing with Courtney and her sister-in-law what plans should be made for Isabel Wolsey's imminent visit, when the three of them got up from the table, and the next thing Susan knew she was stretched out on the sofa in the drawing room.

"Damn your hartshorn," Courtney was saying. "Give her a drop of the Courvoisier."

"I... I fainted," murmured Susan.

Zoe moved the hartshorn away from her nose, and Courtney downed the brandy himself.

"You certainly did, my love. Right into the arms of Cole, poor fellow. He blushed like a schoolgirl."

Susan gave Zoe a shaky little laugh. "It seems I am not so strong as I believed."

When Dr. Richardson arrived next morning, he found Susan in a sorry state. She had no signs of fever, no signs of flu, but when she tried to get up, the room went round and round and she felt very ill indeed. Dr. Richardson smiled. He asked a few questions, asked Nancy a few questions, and smiled still broader. Then he enlightened the Countess as to the nature of this new problem.

"*Me*?" squeaked Susan. "Doctor, you can't be serious?"

"Oh, but I am, my lady. The symptoms are not at all unusual."

"But I... but... *me*? Nancy! You suspected, didn't you. Oh, you are sly!"

Nancy bobbed a curtsey. "Well, milady..." she began.

"Oh, never mind." Susan clasped her hands together. "A baby, imagine that! And not just an ordinary baby, you know, an Heir."

"Or an heiress," the doctor reminded her.

"Oh, yes, a sweet baby girl. I hope she will be exactly like dear Zo, tall and dark and distinguished."

The doctor smiled. Of all his professional duties, this was the one he liked best. There was something infinitely satisfying about the way a woman looked when she was told she would have a child. Of course, not all women were so charmed as this one; some repined over their figures, or their youth, or the restrictions that would be placed on their frivolous enjoyments. But this one was adorable, tumbling brown curls, dark soft eyes wide and shining, face aglow with excitement. Why, she's hardly more than a child herself, thought Richardson, and yet, she is delighted to be a mother.

Susan put a hand on the doctor's arm.

"We needn't tell his lordship just yet, need we? I mean, it's early, and I should like to be quite, quite sure."

The doctor smiled and patted her hand.

When Courtney came upstairs some half an hour later, Susan scrutinized his face for signs that Dr. Richardson might have dropped a hint in his ear, but Courtney's expression gave nothing away. Susan smiled a secret little smile and coaxed him to sit beside her on the bed. He did, and professed himself to be very glad the fainting spell had been only a fluke, for he found himself obliged to go away for a few days. He would be leaving the house shortly. When Susan asked where he was going, he replied only, "To the country," and when she asked what for, he replied only, "Business, my dear."

In a way, his absence was a blessing, for Susan continued to feel very sick in the mornings for a few days. By afternoon, however, she felt quite herself, and began to go out again. She shopped one day, drove another day, and soon was fit enough to accept an invitation to tea at

Lady Marchbanks's. Rather looking forward to it, she donned a new bonnet, a fetching creation trimmed with dark coney-fur, and sallied forth. At first, she enjoyed herself. Most of the other callers had been to see her during her convalescence, and so she was not lost in the conversation, but it was pleasant to see a few new faces. At least, it was pleasant until one of those new faces happened to mention that Lady Heather Clarke had unexpectedly been called out of town.

"And left me with a nasty gap in my table, too, until dear Mrs. Wentworth came to my rescue," complained the speaker.

No one but Amelia noticed that Susan had gone rather pale, and no one thought it very odd that she should plead fatigue and take her departure soon afterwards.

When she got home, she told Nancy that she was not feeling up to dinner, and that she would like a little cold supper in her sitting room. A tray with hard-cooked eggs, ham, a little fowl and a sweet jelly was accordingly brought up. Susan picked at it, and brooded. The more she brooded, the more convinced she became that Courtney had run off to spend a week in the country with his mistress. He was very kind about it, she told herself, but of course he was boring himself half to death hovering over my sickbed. Now he has given himself a holiday. He has gone to the Castle. I daresay they are wandering hand in hand about the countryside, climbing the tower to admire the view from the battlements, making love on the zodiac carpet. The fact that none of these activities accorded even remotely with the personality of Lady Heather did not intrude on Susan's gloomy cogitations. She went to bed at half-past eight, thoroughly out of sorts.

When she surfaced again into consciousness, it was with the feeling of disorientation that comes from being jolted unnaturally out of a sound sleep. For a moment she hardly knew where she was; then she heard a rattling at her door.

"Who's there?" she cried pettishly. "I wish you will go away. I do not wish to be disturbed."

"Susan," came a terrible voice, "open this door immediately."

She flew out of bed to do so. Courtney stepped inside the room.

"If you ever, ever lock me out of this room again, I shall have the door broken in with axes, and throw you out into the street with nothing but the clothes you stand up in."

"M-my lord, I didn't know you were home. I didn't lock the door against you."

"Oh? Who else were you expecting?"

"No one!" cried Susan. "Only Nancy, or the chambermaid. And I only locked the hall door, not the others. But if you don't wish me to lock it, I won't lock it."

She hovered anxiously while he glanced into the dressing room, and saw that, indeed, that door was not secured.

"Well, I daresay I was too quick to take offense," he said awkwardly. "I beg your pardon."

Susan was relieved. He had looked so angry.

"You have gone to bed very early. It's only just ten o'clock."

"Oh, well, I was a bit tired. I went to Amelia's for tea."

"And that tired you? They told me you were quite recovered."

"Well, I am, I think. To tell the truth, I was more in a crotchet than tired."

Courtney's eyes were very strange. He had not been drinking, Susan thought, but his eyes were strange.

"Are you in a crotchet still?"

"No. No, I'm fine."

"And you are not tired?"

What was this examination? "No, I am not particularly tired now."

"Very well," said Courtney. He crossed the room to leave. "You may get back into bed if you like. I shall join you in half an hour."

With this blunt announcement, he went out.

Susan gaped after him. She tried to think of what she might do to prepare for his return, but could think of

nothing. She dashed on a spot of cologne, wondered if she should unplait her hair, and climbed back into bed. She left the light on, and wondered what it would be like this time. She came to the conclusion that it might be quite nice, since he was not drunk and she was no longer virgin. She wondered if it was quite proper when one was expecting, and decided that perhaps it was not, but it couldn't really hurt. After all, nothing showed as yet, and in fact, she wasn't absolutely sure she was expecting. She wondered if he had quarreled with Heather again, but this time she resolutely put Heather out of her mind. This time, it really was going to happen, and that bitch Heather was *not* going to spoil it for her.

After what seemed a very long time, Courtney returned, in his blue-green dressing gown, his hair falling over his shoulders.

"Your hair is so beautiful," said Susan, to break the silence. "Just like Zoe's."

He smiled and sat down on the edge of the bed. He loosened her own hair from the pins that held it under her small white cap, and unplaited it. Then he got up and took off his dressing-gown. He wore nothing underneath it. Susan flushed to the roots of her hair and averted her eyes.

"Hey!" The voice was soft, caressing. "Am I so ugly?"

"N-no. At least, I don't... You are *naked*!"

"Quite so. And you shall be, too."

"Oh, no!" cried Susan, clutching at the bosom of her nightdress. "I couldn't!"

Courtney was laughing, but in a pleasant way.

"What's this, maiden modesty? But we both know you are not a maiden, my love." There was a hint of a sting in this reminder.

"But no man has ever seen me without my clothes!"

"Spoken like a good bourgeoisie. Come, darling, up!"

He took her hand, and pulled her out of bed. Then he untied the drawstring of her night-gown, and pushed it down around her shoulders. Susan stood, paralyzed, as it fell in a heap to the floor about her ankles.

Courtney's face changed as he looked her up and down, then he breathed, "Oh, my God," and took her into his arms.

After a moment, he lay down with her between the fine white sheets. He was direct, possessive, and he seemed to feel an ecstacy that Susan could not quite share. But it was heaven enough, she thought, to feel him near her, needing her, to hold him close and listen to the soft sounds he made, expressive of desire and delight. When, sated, he pressed his lips to her neck and murmured an apology, she had no idea what he was apologizing for. She protested that she was completely happy. Her protestations seemed to displease him.

"Never dissimulate to me, my dear," he said testily. "Some men prefer it, I know but I don't." He kissed her mouth. "Another time, you will not be left behind."

Puzzled, Susan wondered if perhaps he was referring to his recent trip to the country, and she found relief in the thought that if he intended to take her with him next time, he would not take Lady Heather.

Before the night was over, she had begun to have glimmerings of understanding, and before the week was out, she comprehended fully the reason for the initial apology, which meant, of course, that apologies were no longer needed. She had discovered the enormous difference between simply being taken by a man, and making love.

But all that was confined to the nighttime. By day, Courtney remained as distant and offhand as he had been since arriving in London. In fact, he seemed even more distant, sometimes, and when he was not being offhand, he was irritable, sarcastic, and sometimes downright rude. When Susan complained, she was given to understand that Courtney in no way intended to let their new-found intimacy impinge on his freedoms.

"My dear child, the way we lived before was unnatural. Now that we have corrected the situation, we must guard against going too far in the opposite direction. It is not to be expected that a man and wife should be always in each other's pockets."

"I don't ask to live in your pocket," replied Susan, piqued. "I only wonder how you can be so fond at one time, and seem at other times to look upon me as nothing but a nuisance."

"Sometimes, madam, you *are* nothing but a nuisance."

Susan pouted and turned her face to the wall.

"And sometimes," he went on, in a special tone of voice, "I am very fond of you indeed."

Susan tried to keep her face turned away, but when he tickled her ear with his littlest finger in just that particular manner, she went all to pieces. He laughed, and pressed himself up against her, spoon-fashion, and that was the end of discussion for that night. It was always the same: in the daytime, Susan could not get near enough to him to talk; at night, she could not keep him at enough of a distance. And once, when she had persisted in pursuing a line of conversation which he did not like, he simply got out of bed and went away. So she let be.

After a week or two, he ceased to come to her every night. Then one night he was out till after dawn, but the next evening he spent entirely at home, with his wife. No pattern seemed to develop. Sometimes he would stay out late, and come home at daybreak, not infrequently accompanied by riotous and noisy companions that occasionally stopped for breakfast. Sometimes, he would wander into the house at mid-morning, hollow-eyed, as often morose as content. On these occasions, Susan never knew if he would snap at her or smile. And sometimes he would go out with her, and sometimes he would stay in with her, and when he did, she never knew if they would quarrel or go to bed, or both in turns.

"I never see you at fashionable parties any more," she hazarded once. "They say you spend much of your time at White's."

"Better there than some other places, hey?" was his response. He smiled, and Susan fancied by his color that he was a bit drunk, though it was barely noon.

"You may go where you like, for all of me," she replied.

And he said, "La-di-dah," and laughed.

That night he came to her room, more than a bit drunk

and inclined to be argumentative.

"I am not at White's tonight, you see."

She tried to be conciliatory.

"I don't mind White's. It's just that sometimes it's awkward. People wonder where you are, and I have to say I have no idea."

"So why should you know where I am? I've no idea where you are, a large part of the time."

"Well, you've only to ask, you know. I should be happy to tell you."

He snorted. "But what would you tell me? You are such a bad liar, Susan."

"Liar?" she cried. "How dare you say I would lie?"

He smiled. "You are charming when you are indignant."

"Well, you are nasty! You are boozy and disgusting!"

Courtney took up his coat.

"You are not charming when you are vulgar. Vulgar women I can find elsewhere."

Not surprisingly, that was one of the nights he was away till morning.

Susan bore it all with fortitude. She began to feel that it was as if Lord Courtney's body housed several disparate creatures: a careless bachelor, a hardened roué, an enchanting lover. And on certain occasions, state occasions, or rare sober mornings in the library, Susan thought she caught a glimpse of a responsible husband, though his manifestations were dishearteningly rare. But she had a reason for trying to make the best of things, for she had become convinced that the suspicions voiced by Dr. Richardson were right. She quailed, however, at the thought of telling Courtney, partly because she was afraid to inject any new element into their precarious relationship, partly because she was afraid he might find it a reason to stop making love. So she just went on, taking each day as it came. And very few people of Lord Courtney's or his wife's acquaintance saw anything much out of the ordinary in their relationship.

Of course, their servants did. And though servants' opinions were of little account in the "Great World," they

did have a way of getting passed round. It happened, for instance, that several of Lord Courtney's domestics were on cordial terms with Lady Zoe's, notably a couple of underhousemaids who were frequently lent back and forth as the occasion arose. By the time Isabel Wolsey arrived at Lady Zoe's establishment in Queen Street, Lady Zoe's cook was fully conversant with the state of affairs in the establishment in Grosvenor Square. During the course of a small refreshment being offered to the outriders in Miss Wolsey's entourage, one of whom happened to be a cousin of Lady Zoe's cook, several anecdotes relating to Grosvenor Square were recounted. Zoe's cook's cousin duly brought these home with him, and recounted them to his Uncle John, Lord Rayne's head groom. Rayne's groom John made casual mention of one of these stories in the hearing of Lady's Rayne's dresser Stokes, and Stokes proceeded ruthlessly to pick the groom's brain of all his young cousin had told him, before poor John fairly knew what was happening. And then Stokes, concerned and professing only the best of intentions, found herself duty-bound to drop just a hint of the matter in her mistress's ear.

# *XI*

Lord Rayne arrived in Grosvenor Square four days later. Susan came down the hall steps one afternoon in her riding habit to find him speaking quietly to Cole in the vestibule.

"Ah, my dear, how fortunate I am to find you in," he said, glancing up at her approach. He bestowed upon her a more or less paternal kiss.

Susan, determined to be gay, asked if, when Zoe married Lord Stephen Beauvoir, Lord Rayne would take to kissing him too.

"If he were as pretty as you, I daresay I should," was his laughing reply. "But tell me, do I keep you from an engagement?"

Susan smiled and shook her head. "Where are you putting up? Why have you not come as a matter of course to stay here?"

"As it happens, I have. Cole, Hincks will bring in my luggage."

Susan's eyes danced as she looked at her father-in-law's bland expression. She suspected that if she had not been so prompt in her invitation, he would have gone off to a hotel without a word.

"Cole tells me," Rayne went on, "that the master of the house is not at present within."

"I expect he'll be home soon. Let me order some tea, my lord. I'm sure Hunter will be delighted to see you."

She spoke to Cole in the doorway, then took up pen and paper to cancel her riding engagement. She cancelled so many engagements, trying to keep up with Courtney's

erratic habits, it was a wonder she was still invited anywhere, she thought.

"You do not cry off from an appointment on my account?" asked Lord Rayne.

When Susan admitted she was doing just that, he insisted she not change her plans, but requested to join her. She made appropriate thoughtful remarks about his journey, and fatigue, but he informed her rather crisply that she must beware of offending an aging gentleman's vanity. She laughed, and his wishes prevailed.

It was an agreeable afternoon in the Ring. The trees were bare, but the grass was green, and the sky, which had been leaden for days, had cleared to show itself in clean, cold, elegant Wedgwood blue. Susan and her father-in-law met up first with her party, Isabel, Gerald, Amelia, and a young man named Casimir. Later, they chanced upon Zoe, who tactfully refrained from showing any surprise at her father's unexpected appearance, and Lord Stephen, who was, as always, grave and courteous. Susan devoutly hoped they might chance upon Courtney, but they did not. It was possible, she thought optimistically, that he was at White's, and that one of the people they encountered in the park would see him later and mention Lord Rayne. Otherwise, it was quite possible that he would fail to appear for dinner, and she would have no excuse to offer. Her discomfiture was increased when Lord Rayne invited Zoe and Lord Stephen, impromptu, to join them in Grosvenor Square, but there was nothing Susan could do but suppress her start of dismay and second the invitation with a smile.

At home, neither Cole nor Gustaf could shed any light on the mystery of where Courtney might be or his plans for the evening. Gustaf volunteered to go searching for him, but Susan said no, that might cause talk, and, in the end, when seven o'clock arrived and Courtney had not, they decided to go on and serve dinner without him. Susan did her best to take it all in stride. She seated Lord Rayne at the head of the table, and tried to make a joke of it, but it was obvious to all present that she was distressed and embarrassed.

After dinner, they parted ways. Susan went off to the theater with Zoe and Lord Stephen. Rayne, declining an invitation to join them, set out on his own. He looked in at White's, and then, acting on a suggestion from one of the habitués, began the rounds of the many gaming hells of St. James's. At the third, which was neither one of the fashionable ones nor yet one of the really disreputable, Rayne found his son, seated at a faro table, one foot propped on a chair and a nearly empty glass by his elbow. The accumulation of coins in front of him was neither strikingly large nor strikingly small. Rayne noted with a mild degree of satisfaction that there were no notes of hand, those little white scraps of paper that invariably signified a treacherously deep game, on the table.

As he approached, Courtney commented, "Damme if I haven't seen that man somewhere before," without looking up from his cards.

The other players did look up, and one or two laughed. There was a round of greetings. One rueful young beau said his luck had gone begging for the nonce, and offered Rayne his seat. He played in calm, competent silence for several hands, then got up and moved through the smoke and the deftly weaving waiters to a table of hazard, where he engaged in desultory conversation with an acquaintance until Courtney joined him, and they they strolled off together.

"Didn't know you were coming to Town," said the younger man. "Did you write me?"

"Wouldn't you remember, if I had?" countered his father, with a touch of acerbity.

Courtney shrugged. "Might have slipped my mind. You here for long?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"Where you staying?"

"In Grosvenor Square."

Courtney nodded.

"You don't seem to frequent the place much yourself, my boy. And yet, it seems a well-run, pleasant sort of establishment."

Courtney shrugged again, and lifted a glass of wine

from a tray in passing.

"Lee, what is it then? What the hell is the matter?" asked Lord Rayne, his tone changing abruptly.

"Matter?" Courtney's eyes were opaque. "What should be the matter?"

"Damned if I know. But it's all over town that you're living as if there's to be no tomorrow, and you and your wife would be hard put to recognize each other in the street."

He laughed. "Since when do you bother about gossip, Rayne?"

"Hell and the devil!" Rayne's voice was a discreet undertone, but his temper was flaring. "I'm in no mood for these flip dodges, Lee, I want a serious answer. Of course I don't give a damn for gossip, as gossip, but when it reaches these proportions, I begin to look for a basis in fact. And now I have seen you. You don't look well. It's barely sundown and you're sodden. I wonder how long it's been since you were sober."

"Is that really your affair?" snapped Courtney.

Rayne stared. "Who the hell, who the *hell* do you think you're talking to?"

Courtney looked pained. "And who do you think you're talking to? All this sanctimonious flummery. It won't fadge, Rayne. I know you. Milady Mother's heard something she don't like, and she's sent you up here to slap my hand, hasn't she? Right, now, you've been, and you can go home and tell her it's all exaggerated, and there's an end to it. Come on—have a glass, and we'll go to Sally Watson's. Might as well have some fun, now you're here."

Lord Rayne frowned. He eyed his son's flushed face, his tired mouth, his shadowed brow.

"If you won't trust me, Lee, I can't force you to. I know you aren't drawn to this life; you're driven, but damme if I can see what by."

"Oh, God, spare me the speeches. I've no wish to quarrel with you again over that wench."

"Over the Countess? Are we quarreling over her?"

"You never objected to my style of living before."

"No, but—you will forgive me if I remind you—you were a bachelor, which makes a difference. And even then, as I recall, you did not live in quite this style. Lady Heather, whatever she is, is no Sally Watson."

Courtney laughed and tossed off his glass. "You don't know Lady Heather the way I do."

The twinkle in Rayne's eye was irrepressible. "You think not?"

"Damme, I'll not credit it! Is nothing sacred?"

"Certainly not Heather."

They both laughed.

"Anyway," went on Rayne, "I'll own Heather has her points, and Sally Watson too, but they neither of them will get me a grandson, nor you, my son, an heir."

Courtney snapped the stem of his glass, and lobbed it at the fireplace.

"True enough," he said. "That's a job for an honest woman—if such there be in this world."

Rayne's expression sharpened.

"There's one in your house, man. I'd stake my life on that. Do you doubt it?"

"That sweet child? Could one doubt such magnificent eyes?"

Rayne frowned. "She cannot make a child alone."

Courtney had a blasphemous thought, but suppressed it. "Is that what troubles you, dear papa? Well, put your mind at rest. I don't spend all my nights from home. Susan's pillow and I are not strangers."

The voice was light, ironic, but Lord Rayne believed the words.

"Well then, I suppose your domestic arrangements need not concern me further. But if you could manage without making quite such a stir, it would promote tranquillity in my own domestic arrangements. Claire does hate it when the servants tattle."

Courtney straightened up and his face assumed an expression of haughty disgust that was not one of his most becoming.

"The servants? Which one of my servants gossips about me?"

"Don't delude yourself, my boy. They all do. It's all, as I said before, simply a question of proportion."

And Rayne, knowing he had gained his point, was well enough content to leave the gaming house and spend the rest of the evening with a discreet private party at Sally Watson's.

Susan, having recently returned from the theater and a light refreshment afterwards, was in her pretty blue-violet sitting room looking out over the night-still square when they came home, walking arm in arm, obviously on the best of terms, and obviously thoroughly drunk. They laughed, and sang snatches of song, and wavered in their path down the street. Susan wondered, not for the first time, if Lord Rayne's influence, intentionally or not, was rather to encourage Courtney in his rackety ways than otherwise.

But during the ten days that Rayne spent in Grosvenor Square, Courtney's behavior did markedly improve. Rayne took it for granted that each member of the household should inform either Cole or another member of the household what his plans were for that day, and it became a habit. There were no more embarrassing absences from dinner. Invitations were considered in concert and, once accepted, no longer disregarded at whim. Courtney and his wife were once again seen in company, and gossip abated. It was still said, of course, that Lady Heather smiled knowingly when Courtney's name was mentioned, and a story about Susan and M. de Monteuil (or alternatively, her cousin Gerald) still held credence in certain quarters, but on the whole, things were looking up.

The state of affairs did not deteriorate, in public, after Lord Rayne returned to Queen's Crown. Courtney remained charming, and appearances were kept up. But in private, he was cooler than ever, and occasionally erratic in temper. It seemed that, deprived of the release of misbehavior, he was more snappish and disagreeable. Susan found herself increasingly uncomfortable in his presence, and took to surrounding herself with compan-

ions. She spent her mornings in lessons, still, and enjoyed perhaps most of all her French singing lesson with the courtly M. Piquart. On Mondays and Wednesdays she spent the morning with Amelia, wielding brushes filled with watercolors. Supervised by an accomplished older woman, who was, incidentally, the subject of a current scandal, they worked with greater or lesser diligence, made some progress, and had some fun.

But Susan felt sorely the lack of a real friend. Amelia was good enough company, but over-polished in her Town manners and fundamentally feather-headed. Lady Zoe, Susan's other frequent female companion, had not the drawback of being feather-headed, but was in fact so acute in her perceptions that Susan sometimes had the feeling her innermost secrets, including those she had no wish to confide, were visible to her sister-in-law. Truth to tell, Susan liked Zoe best when they were both with other people, when the older woman's accomplishments and her easy acceptance of the young Countess bolstered her self-confidence. For an intimate, a confidante, someone to share her private thoughts, to giggle with, to freely be herself with, Susan had no one, and she was sometimes very lonely. She had hoped to further her friendship with Isabel Wolsey, but since Bella's arrival in Town she had been much occupied, and Susan had been so busy herself that they had never had the chance for what Susan's Mama called "a really comfortable coze." Still, the two young women always had much to say to each other when they met, and Susan felt no hesitation in stopping by in Queen Street whenever she felt in the mood for a chat. This she did, one raw and rather unpleasant December morning before setting out on a Christmas shopping expedition. She found Isabel at home alone.

"My dear Countess!" cried Bella, jumping up from the little satinwood writing table in Zoe's elegant French sitting room. "I was intending to call on you the very moment I finished this letter to Grandmama. In fact, I was just writing of you. 'Lady Lee wore a peach-colored velvet that set off her sweet complexion *à merveille*, and

Hunter was at quite his Irish-outlaw best, in some beautiful dull black stuff I cannot name.' I refer to Mrs. Whitmore's ball, as you see."

Susan smiled.

"That coat is made of a sort of silk crepe imported from Spain. I'm glad you liked it. I thought it rather funereal, myself, but Lee will wear black."

Isabel noted the provenance of the cloth in her letter, and then put down her pen.

"Let's have a cup of tea," she said. "Have you a moment?"

Susan accepted the invitation with thanks, put aside her bonnet and muff, and divested herself of her furlined cloak.

Isabel spoke cheerfully of this and that while the tea tray was brought in, but as soon as the servant left, she remarked, pouring gracefully, "I told Grandmama that Lee was looking well at Mrs. Whitmore's, because he is such a favorite of hers, but in truth, I think he is not looking well at all. Perhaps, as you say, it was just his black coat, but he used to look very well in black, with those blue eyes and his white skin."

Susan gazed into her teacup.

"I don't mean to pry," continued Bella, "but perhaps he should see a doctor. You know Lee is one of my oldest friends, and I don't mind telling you I am worried about him."

"It's no use to call in a doctor," said Susan. "If there is anything amiss in my lord's constitution, it is certainly his liver. He is never without a glass in his hand, and I despair of making him see that he is destroying himself."

Isabel was shocked.

"Surely you exaggerate, my love. Hunter was never one to refuse a good burgundy, but he doesn't take it to excess. That is, I have frequently seen him foxed, but never two nights in a row."

"Well, now he is never sober two nights—or even two days—in a row."

"Then you may depend upon it, something is very wrong. Perhaps he is in some sort of trouble. Money,

perhaps? Please don't think me presumptuous..."

"Oh, no. Of course, I know you only wish to help, Bella. But it isn't money."

"Perhaps he really is ill, then, and doesn't wish to tell you. Perhaps he drinks to kill the pain. You really should find out. I assure you, it isn't at all like him."

"I know what it is." Susan felt tears start to her eyes, and she averted them from Isabel's clear, concerned ones. "It's me," she blurted suddenly. "He drinks to escape from me. He... he hates me, and he wishes he had never married me."

"Oh, no!" cried Isabel.

She started up instinctively, and put her arms about her friend who, at this first sign of human compassion, promptly went to pieces. It was a blessed relief.

"He does, Bella. He hates me! He says such... such cruel things and he looks at me... he looks at me as if he would like to strangle me."

"Susan!"

"He does, he does. He hates me!"

Isabel could think of nothing to do but rock the girl in her arms, till the sobbing had died down. At last she was able to dry her eyes and sit up. Then Bella tried to make some sense out of what she had said.

"Tell me, now, my dear, how can Lord Courtney hate you? He must have been fond of you indeed at one time, to have married you. He was flying in the face of all convention."

"He never was fond of me. He was s-s-sorry for me, and my father beat him, so he did it as a grand gesture, to show he was noble and not a b-b-blackguard and a billy-goat, like my papa said."

At another time, Isabel would have laughed out loud at this disjointed explanation, which made many things all too clear.

Now, however, she said gently, "But he was a blackguard and a billy-goat. Always has been. I should know."

Susan snuffled. "You too?"

"No, but I came very close at one time, though I had

been amply forewarned. Still, there is much good in Hunter. He wants a little growing up is all."

"Will drinking brandy all day help him to grow up?"

"Well, that's another thing, I think. I can't see why, if he finds your presence distressing, he doesn't just pack you off to the country. Has he tried to?"

Susan shook her head. "He is too proud. He does not wish to admit to the world he is sorry he married me."

"So he keeps you in Town, to grace his table. But he might go on quite easily if he chose; the mere fact of being married never yet hampered any man I ever knew, if he was bent on pursuing his pleasures. No... He is enacting a Cheltenham tragedy. But why?"

"Because he hates me."

Isabel glanced significantly at her friend's thickening waistline.

"He doesn't find you entirely repulsive, I see."

Susan blushed, and pressed her palms to her cheeks in a gesture of dismay.

"You can tell? I must speak to him, then; I really must."

"He doesn't *know*?"

"No, I... No, he's been so beastly, I haven't had the heart. I was so happy, when I first suspected. I could pretend it was all right between us. And sometimes when he was unkind, I could pretend that when I told him, it really would come all right between us. But now, I... I don't think anything can make it right." She began to cry again, softly. "I am quite cast down, Bella."

"Well, that explains it!" said Isabel heartily. "You've made a great deal out of a very small matter. You are suffering from the megrims that commonly attend your condition, my love."

"It is not my megrims that keep Lee in his cups," said Susan.

"Oh," said Isabel. "No more it is." It really did seem extraordinary, she thought. Whatever explanation she came up with, although it seemed good at first, never quite fit. "Well, perhaps he has guessed you are expecting, and is angry because you have not told him."

"Oh, no, it has been going on much longer than that.

He has been cruel to me... oh, since the very beginning." And such was Susan's state of mind, that she really believed this. "On the night of my party, for instance, my spring flowers party..."

She paused inquiringly, and Isabel said, "Yes, I've heard of that party. It was a smashing success, they said."

"It was. It was a lovely party, and I worked so hard on it, and Courtney, well, afterwards, when the guests left—he left too! He just went right away with Monty and Gerald, and left me standing there. On the doorstep. In front of everybody!"

"I thought you said everybody had gone."

"Well, they had, or they were just leaving. But in front of the servants. I felt like a servant myself!"

"Well," said Isabel, "I'll own that isn't exactly tactful, but I can't say it sounds like cruelty to me. I daresay it wasn't too late, and the gentlemen were feeling convivial."

"Oh, that they were. But that wasn't the worst Courtney has done. I only mentioned it because I'm sure it happened before I was expecting. Because it was that night... I mean, he came back later, in the middle of the night, quite odiously foxed, and, well, it was that night the baby was... conceived, you know. And since he was being hateful to me already before that night, it couldn't possibly be that he is being hateful because I am expecting, or because I haven't told him. If you see what I mean."

"Yes, of course," said Isabel soothingly. But it doesn't hang together very well, she thought, wrinkling her brow.

"I rather suspect," said Susan, "it has something to do with that vile Clarke woman."

"Oh, surely that's not still going on!"

"Well, I don't know. He told me once it was over, but I think they had just quarreled, for then he went away with her to the country..."

"Oh, I don't believe it!" cried Isabel.

"Well, he went away on a mysterious trip, and she went away on a mysterious trip at exactly the same time, and of course everyone said..."

"The bitch!"

Susan gave a glimmer of a smile.

"I don't know if they said *that*, but I certainly did!" The smile faded. "Anyway, when Lee came back, after cutting his trip rather short, he was very proud and autocratic—you know how he gets—and rapidly became quite unfit to live with. That was just about the time you arrived. Then Lord Rayne arrived, and it was a bit better, but now he is gone it's quite as bad as it was before, at least at home."

"I will not believe Hunter is breaking his heart over Heather Clarke," declared Isabel. "I don't know what it is, but it cannot be that. I shall find out!"

She smiled at Susan, and Susan smiled, and put up her damp handkerchief.

"How good it is to be able to confide in someone. I declare I feel better already!"

"I am glad, for I have something I wish to confide in *you*," said Bella.

Susan's eyes brightened and she leaned forward in anticipation.

"Please do!"

Isabel's cheeks glowed pink. She tucked an escaping ringlet up behind her ear. "I have been bursting to tell, and had no one to listen! I think Gerry is going to ask me to marry him."

"*Gerry*? He's always treated you like a sister, Bella!"

She sighed. "I know. So tiresome. There have been times I was ready to wring his neck."

"Oh, Bella, you are so sly! You have had an attraction for Gerry all along, and no one has had the slightest idea."

"Certainly no one has had the slightest idea. If they had, they would have been throwing me at his head quite mercilessly, and the case would have been hopeless. But, left to ourselves—left to *my*self, rather—we have gone on tolerably well, and I think, I really do think, a happy conclusion is in the offing.

The two beautifully coiffed heads met confidentially over the tea table.

"The other evening, when we had been dancing a gavotte, or some such strenuous sort of dance, I said I wanted a bit of fresh air. We strolled on the terrace, and

into the shrubbery. It was no good. So, coming back up the terrace steps, I stumbled and fell. You know—it's the oldest trick in the world. When he caught me, I leaned against him, and looked up into his face. Our eyes met, and suddenly, for the first time in his life, it occurred to that great bumbling nincompoop that I was a girl, a real, breathing girl, soft in all the right places, and eminently kissable." Isabel laughed. "Well, he dropped me like a hot potato, as you can imagine, and I didn't see him again for the rest of the night. But next day he came to call, and yesterday he brought me flowers."

"What sort of flowers?"

"Roses, red and yellow. Just there." Isabel gestured.

Susan nodded judiciously. "I think, my dear, that your assessment of the situation is an astute one. I also think," she smiled, "that we had best not be closeted here like this when the gentleman puts in an appearance."

"Right you are," said Bella. "Just let me get my hat, and we'll go."

"Not you! I meant that I should take myself off. Don't you wish to be here when he comes?"

"Certainly I wish to, but I think it would be a great deal more politic to be out. It will not hurt the companion of my childhood to see that I have other things to do than wait about for him to come to the point."

Susan agreed, though she had never been able to employ such sagacious tactics herself, and the two young women set off in Courtney's carriage, still laughing and talking a good deal, though the subject had turned from confidential matters.

They made their way into Bond Street, where they paid calls on several shopkeepers, whose enthusiasm for their presence was in direct proportion to the magnitude of their probable purchases. At the draper's, Isabel succeeded in finding the precise shades of silk Zoe had been searching for for her latest piece of needlework, and Susan fell in love with a fine embroidered style of cherry-colored ribbon, of which she bought some yards for herself and her sisters. At the emporium in Burlington Gardens, Isabel made the happy discovery of what she

pronounced to be the perfect Christmas gift for her grandmother, a sweet-smelling wooden box encrusted with shells. In the window of one of the jewelers' shops, a clock of experimental design caught Susan's eye, and she promptly bought it for Lord Rayne. Considering, she also chose an imported cameo to send her mother. In Piccadilly, the ladies stopped off at Fortnum's, where, taking a complimentary cup of some very expensive China tea, they purchased such exotic delicacies as dried banana, shavings of cocoa-nut, several varieties of French bonbon, kippered salmon from Finland, a couple of Dutch cheeses, and some fine Virginia tobacco.

"I daresay we could get the same, only cheaper, from the tobacconer's in Stafford Street," whispered Susan, "but my papa will like it better if it comes wrapped in Fortnum's paper."

The next stop, she informed her companion, was to be Tattersall's.

Isabel's eyes widened. "Are we buying a horse?"

Susan leaned back in the carriage and arranged her cloak over her knees as they headed for the market in Belgravia.

"We probably shan't actually buy," she said, affecting nonchalance, "but I thought we might just poke round. If we really fancy any particular beast, well..." In point of fact, she wanted to buy a horse for her husband, but she felt awkward about saying so.

"Horse dealers drive notoriously hard bargains, you know," observed Bella, "and will surely try to cheat you, with a showy piece that has no wind or weak knees."

"I trust we are not such flats as to be taken in by a lot of rogues! If we can't be perfectly sure, then we shan't buy. And if we need advice, we'll bring Gerry round, or Monty."

"Or Zo, for that matter. She's as good a judge of horseflesh as any man, I'm sure. I do hope we find something, though. This is quite an adventure!"

As soon as the carriage pulled up, however, the young women found they were sorry they had not brought a man with them, for even if they had been perfectly confident in

their ability to spot a defect in a horse, they felt they were out of their element. There were few females of any sort among the strolling, squabbling, speculating clients at the horse market, and no females at all of their sort. There was much rough language adrift on the rich-smelling air, and the conclusion of most deals seemed to be attended by the frequent passing back and forth of gin bottles. Susan and Isabel, in their elegant morning dresses and pale quilted petticoats, wandered for a few minutes up and down the rows of stalls, holding their skirts as high as they dared out of the mud. They watched one pretty roan go through her paces in the roped-off showing area for a bluff, skeptical businessman, and spoke briefly to a dealer waiting to show a tall black gelding to a supercilious gentleman in ministerial garb. Then, discomfitted by the frank scrutiny of dealers, roustabouts, and customers alike, the young ladies retreated to their carriage, vowing to come another time, with appropriate reinforcements, in clothes they didn't care about.

Just as she leaned forward to give the coachman the order to depart, a pair of large, mournful brown eyes caught Susan's. Her face lit up. She tumbled out of the carriage, and walked a few paces forward along the road. Isabel, peering out of the window in bewilderment, saw her engage in a few moments' animated conversation with a small, thin man in a ragged, inadequate coat and torn breeches. Then, to Isabel's astonishment, and not a little to her dismay, Susan returned to the carriage leading the man's erstwhile companion by a tattered and very dirty tag of rope.

"Susan, you can't intend to bring that creature in here!" cried Bella, gathering up her skirts protectively.

"Certainly I do," replied Susan. "Where else can he ride?"

"Well... well, don't you think he might sit up with the footmen? My dear, the beast assuredly carries vermin."

Susan frowned, then shrugged.

"The footmen would be quite mortified, and would probably give their notice. I daresay you're right about the vermin, but we'll have him sit right the way across the

coach, and I doubt he will try very hard to jump off."

So Susan got in, and up behind her climbed a large, lank-limbed, odoriferous animal that bore a certain, but not very strong, resemblance to a poodle.

When Richard, the second footman, and Betsy, the scullery maid, hauled him out of the old tin bath in the back courtyard, the dog was seen to be more poodle-like, but even lanker than originally perceived. He was given a second meal, which made his stomach balloon out under his ribs, and created in him such a stupefied complaisance that it was no trouble at all to give him a general barbering, which eliminated matted fur and knotted clumps of grime, and a second scrubbing with lye soap. By the end of the second rinse, the hapless creature remained docile, but looked as if he almost preferred hunger and fleas to this merciless bettering of his condition. He had, however, become quite handsome in his coat of crisp chocolate brown curls, with his long, pointed, aristocratic muzzle and his fine elegant feet. Susan had him rubbed down with a little oil, for his lye-chafed skin, and fluffed up with a towel.

Then she had him brought up to her sitting-room, and once the servants were safely out of sight, she took him across the hall to Courtney's room, where a fire burned cozily in expectation of his lordships's imminent arrival. There she left the dog, to make himself at home, and went off to take a bath herself, well pleased with the originality of her gift.

It was about an hour later, as the Countess toasted her toes and reread a letter from her mother, that Courtney came slamming into the sitting room, looking like a thundercloud.

"Susan, what the devil is that dog doing in my room?"

"Dog?" echoed Susan, stalling.

"That dog. That great shaggy mongrel. Cole says you are responsible for introducing it into the house."

"Yes, I . . . I bought him at Tattersall's."

Courtney tapped his foot.

"At last report, Tattersall's was a horse market, not a dog market."

"Of course it is not a dog market. But I found this dog there, and I bought him. He... the man *was* going to eat him!"

"Oh, Lord. So you must play the Good Samaritan to the canine population of Knightsbridge." Courtney now looked pained but resigned. "Well, if you must, for God's sake keep your refugees out of my room. Damnation, why do you cloud up like that? I've said you can keep the beast. Of course, we'll send it down to the country, but you can keep it. Don't weep, for God's sake."

Susan blinked back her tears, but the disappointment was too much for her. One or two large droplets coursed slowly down her cheek.

"Oh, God, I'm such a fool for tears." Although the words were muttered into his lordship's neckcloth, they were just barely audible.

He knelt down by the side of Susan's chair.

"You don't like him," murmured Susan brokenly.

"Of course I do. I'm sure I do. It's just that he has et my slipper, and I wasn't expecting him. He's a lovely dog, Susan, but he's too big to live in a town house."

Susan dabbed at her eyes with the sleeve of her dressing gown. When Courtney proffered his handkerchief, she took it, not noticing that as he relinquished it, he laid his hand on her knee.

"I thought... He was so sweet, with that face of his. And he has such good bones. He reminded me of you. I thought you would like him."

"And so I do, child. So I do."

The light came back into Susan's eyes.

"Then you'll keep him?"

"Of course we'll keep him. But don't you think, in the country..."

"I meant for your own dog, your very own. He can't be your very own if he is packed off to the country."

"I'll keep him," said Courtney. "I didn't realize he was a present."

"Perhaps it was a stupid present."

"No, it's a fine present." He brushed the tangled tresses from her shoulder. "A lovely present."

Now Susan recognized the soft, slightly sleepy note in his voice. Her heart leapt. He hadn't touched her in several weeks, but now his fingers pulled open her bodice, and he kissed her breasts. She touched his hair. She forgot her disappointments, her bitterness, her loneliness, and remembered only the joy of surrender. She kissed his head, and rubbed her cheek against his. When he pulled her to the floor in front of the fire, she came easily. Neither of them heard the dressing room door open, heard Nancy's little gasp, or heard her go away again. They were absorbed in each other.

Twice the fire burned bright, and twice burned down again, before Courtney gave a soft sigh of satisfaction and sat up against the armchair. Laughing, he foraged under the furniture for his shoes and tried to make sense out of the twisted folds of his shirttails.

"What a pair of wantons we are!"

The words were said in a tone of mock dismay, but even as he said them, the amusement died out of Courtney's eyes, and their blue brilliance went cold. Susan, however, was drawing her dressing gown about her with unfeigned modesty, and didn't see the change in his face. She bustled about, setting the disordered furniture straight, poking up the fire and returning the poker and tongs properly to their fittings.

"We shall be dreadfully late for dinner, I'm afraid," she murmured inconsequentially.

"I," said Courtney, "am going out."

He got to his feet, buttoned his breeches adroitly, took up his coat, and, slinging it over his shoulder, left the room. Susan, looking after him a little anxiously, soon succeeded in repressing her fears, and consoled herself with the memory of what had just passed.

Indeed, for the rest of the evening, she could occupy her mind with little else. She dined at home, alone, in a reverie that the footman commented upon, and was rebuked for his presumption by the punctilious Mr. Cole. She went for a short time to a card party, where she was so distracted she lost quite a lot of money, and had, for the first time, to sign a pledge.

Her attention was rivetted for a brief interval by cousin Gerald, who treated her to a lengthy and rather rambling discourse on the pros and cons of the married state, and the possibly indispensible qualities of the virtuous female. But when he failed to proceed to specifics, and only continued to mouth generalities in an axiomatic sort of way, Susan lost interest, and said almost sharply that it was no good Gerry expecting her to make up his mind for him; he'd have to make it up for himself. Whereupon, slightly abashed, Gerry kissed her hand, muttered, "Quite right, my dear—always are," and wandered off.

Susan remained sitting quietly in the window seat until M. de Monteuil happened by. Upon his enquiring whether madame might command him in something, she shook her head abstractedly, and then, abruptly changing her mind, requested him to call her carriage. When he rejoined her to say that it had been brought round and was waiting, Susan thanked him kindly.

"Would it be a service or an importunity in me to offer my escort, Lady Lakewood?"

"Not an importunity, Monty; you are never importunate. But—well, perhaps it would be a good idea." She smiled shyly. "I am never quite easy, driving through the city alone at night."

The Count bowed. "I am delighted to be able to afford you some slight reassurance, *ma chère*."

The two of them accordingly bade their hostess goodnight. It never occurred to Susan that she was providing ammunition for the gossips, but one or two guests glanced significantly after them, as she and Monteuil departed.

The drive passed mostly in silence. They discussed briefly their respective plans for the coming holiday, and then both seemed to sink into their own thoughts. At Grosvenor Square, Susan got out, instructed the driver to take M. de Monteuil wherever he wished to go, and went inside. As she passed into the house, an upstairs window curtain fluttered.

Susan was surprised to learn that his lordship had come in some time before. She knocked softly on his door

as she passed, but got no response. Then, passing through her sitting room with a secret little smile and a blush as she glanced at the hearth, she went to bed.

In the morning, she woke early. She lay abed for some time, thinking over her situation. The conversation with Isabel, so sensible and down-to-earth, had made her a little ashamed of the way she had, she thought, been turning Courtney into a bogeyman in her mind. True, he didn't love her, but he did like her, when she didn't bore him, and yesterday evening's episode had proved that in spite of his recent coldness, she did not yet bore him all the time. Susan vowed she would do better. She had expected both too much and too little. She had expected Courtney to love her, which was too much; and when it had become clear that he could not love her, she had taken his thoughtless and inconsiderate behavior for granted. But thoughtless and inconsiderate behavior was too little; she had a right to more than that, and so she would tell him. She would stand up for herself, and he would respect her, so long as she did not cry and go all soppy and sentimental. Soppy and sentimental, she told herself, he will hate. I shall be frank, and forthright, and mature, and he will not find me a bore.

With this admirable resolution, Susan jumped out of bed and rang for Nancy. She would go down immediately and request an hour with his lordship in his library before he went out for the day. As she waited for the maid, she walked over to the long glass and examined her reflection in the mirror. How could Bella tell she was pregnant? She stood in profile to the mirror. Of course, in this thin nightgown it showed, the thickened waist, the swollen breasts.

That's a baby in there, Susan told herself, wonderingly. A real, very small person. It will get bigger—she thrust her belly forward—and bigger—she thrust out her belly still further, and took a few sway-backed steps. And then it will be born, with a tiny red scrunched-up face, and tiny little hands. Resuming her normal posture, she cradled the imaginary baby in her arms, rocking a little. Then she turned back to the mirror, smiling dreamily, to inspect her

figure some more, and marvel over the miracle of generation.

The smile froze, the dream disintegrated. Reflected in the mirror behind her, watching, was Lord Courtney, with a passion of malevolence in his face that was terrifying. Susan glanced over her shoulder for some other occupant of the room; she couldn't believe such a look was directed at her. When she turned to face the man himself, the look was gone.

"Good morning," said Courtney.

"I...I wanted to tell you," faltered Susan. "I am increasing."

"Evidently."

Susan tried to read his face.

"Aren't you pleased at all?"

He laughed. "Pleased? That's a bit too much to ask."

Susan's heart sank. "Oh. Oh, well, I rather thought it was nice, but if you don't like it, then I...I am sorry."

"Sorry? Well, maybe you are. But sorry don't pay the bills, as they say. However. I shall disown it, of course."

"Disown?" Susan repeated blankly.

"If you cooperate," he went on, not seeing or not caring to see that she tottered and almost fell before she managed to grope her way to a chair, "it can be managed quite discreetly. Only the family need know, and the customary trustworthy servant. There are cottages aplenty on our estates where a nameless child may be brought up in reasonable comfort. Though it will kill me to tell Rayne," he muttered, more to himself than to Susan, who was hardly hearing anyway. "I don't suppose," he said, his voice rising, "you could be persuaded not to bring the child to term?"

"You're mad," said Susan.

"Yes, I thought you would balk at that. Damn middle-class prudery. Though I must say... well, never mind that. I tell you, though, Susan, if you try to pass this bastard off as my child, I shall make the most unholy scandal, and be damned to the social consequences. It will be the divorce of the century, every aspect of our lives and our marriage dragged through the courts and plastered all

over the newspapers. Your father will almost certainly go to jail. Do you hear me?"

Susan was staring out of the window. It looked rather cold. Maybe it would rain—might even snow.

"You hear me. And you don't much like what you hear. But what did you expect? *What in hell did you expect*?"

He approached the chair, and grabbed her by the arms. Susan began to tremble in every limb, but there was no change in her dazed, vacant expression.

"Other children, Susan, others I could tolerate. Hell, half the men in London couldn't say for certain how many of their children are their own. But not the first, Susan, not the heir. The heir must be of my blood. I should have thought even a chit of your birth would understand that." A look of anguish suddenly distorted his black, angry scowl. "If only you had told me, if I could have trusted you..."

"But it is," said Susan, in a clear, though faraway voice.

He stiffened. "What is what?"

"It is your child. Of course it is."

"*Bitch*!" he screamed, and hit her across the face. "A whore's trick, and now a whore's lie to deck it out! Can't you tell the truth even now?"

He looked as if he would hit her again, but mastered himself and walked across the room to stand with his back to where she lay, only half conscious, crumpled in the delicate blue-striped chair.

"Well, lies are no good, Susan. You were four weeks gone before ever I came to your bed. I had it from Richardson. Of course, he had no idea..." He passed his hand across his eyes, and straightened his back. "I don't think there's any more to be said. It seems to me your wisest course would be to prepare to retire to Courtney within the next few days."

Without looking back, he left the room.

"He doesn't remember," whispered Susan, to the walls. "He just doesn't remember anything about it. Maybe he doesn't want to remember."

# *XII*

Zoe frowned in perplexity at a handwritten note on her brother's cream-colored vellum stationery with its black horse crest.

"Bella, my dear, Hunter says he regrets he will be unable to entertain us at dinner tonight as planned. Her ladyship is suffering from an untimely indisposition."

Isabel looked up from her sewing. "Who, Susan?"

Zoe shrugged. "I suppose he means Susan."

Reaching for the paper, Isabel perused it briefly.

"'... regrets ... ladyship ... untimely indisposition ...' Has he got himself a secretary, do you suppose? No, that's Lee's fist. But it certainly doesn't sound like him."

"The tone," agreed Zoe, "is singular."

It was barely an hour later that Courtney looked up from the writing table in his study to see two familiar feminine forms bearing down upon him. He gave a howl of outrage.

"Cole! I am Out! I will not see these women!"

"Cole has been left expostulating in the hall," replied Zoe tranquilly.

"Sack him," said Courtney.

"May we take a seat, Lee?" inquired Isabel, with a sunny smile.

"No," said Courtney. "I wish you will both go to hell."

He ran his fingers through his hair, which did not appear to have been combed for several days. Zoe and Isabel exchanged dubious glances. Cole appeared, stammering apologies.

"You've got the sack, Cole," interrupted his lordship. "Get out, and take these damned jades with you."

Zoe favored her brother with a level stare, expressive of the most intense disgust, and swept out of the room, leaving the field to Isabel. Isabel, retaining her sunny and slightly idiotic smile, sat down. Cole, nonplussed, looked from Zoe to Bella, and from Bella to Zoe's retreating back, and opted for the better part of valor. The door closed behind him.

Courtney swore softly, mournfully, and took a practiced pull on the bottle at his elbow.

"Two out of three's not bad," he reflected. "Brandy, rid me of this last pest, will you?"

The brown poodle, so addressed, gazed speculatively in Isabel's direction and thumped his tail on the carpet.

"What's all this about the Countess being ill, Lee?" said Bella. "I hope it's nothing serious."

"No, not serious. She's dead, that's all."

"Lee!" shrieked Isabel, leaping out of her chair.

"Ah, yes. Dear, departed. Dear, departed Countess."

"You are raving. You are drunk and delirious."

"Possible. Quite possible. Possibly even probable. But then again..."

Trailing off vaguely, he reached again for the bottle. Isabel made a grab for it, but Courtney was faster. He whisked it out of her reach protectively.

"Ne-ver provoke violence in a dedicated tippler, my dear. Can be dangerous."

He nursed the bottle for a moment, then put it down and held out his arms to Isabel. Anxious to break through the barrier of alcoholic non-communication, she came round behind the desk and let him catch her about the waist. He buried his face in her skirts.

"Oh, Bella, why didn't we marry, the way they all wanted us to?"

Isabel said nothing, but stroked his hair lightly. After a few moments she disengaged herself to perch on the edge of the desk, very near him.

"Lee, where is Susan?"

"Gone," he said. "Gone, gone gone."

"Gone where?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Courtney.

Isabel gathered up her patience in both hands.

"Where has Susan gone?"

He shrugged.

"Has she run away?"

He shrugged.

"Well, how long has she been gone? Can you tell me that?"

He started to shrug, then made an effort to concentrate.

"I think I know. It must have been... no, I don't remember. A couple of days, something like that. What does it matter?"

"Have you been here, Lee, in this room, ever since you found she was gone?"

His eyes unfocussed.

"Bella, I hit her. I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to, I meant to keep my temper, but when she... when she... oh, *God*, if only she had told me the truth, long ago. I don't say I wouldn't have been angry, but I see that part of it was my fault. I corrupted her. I taught her to accept... but I never taught her to lie."

"Susan," said Isabel, "doesn't know how to lie. If you think she has lied to you, you are mistaken."

Courtney stared into space for a long moment, apparently trying by force of will to clear his brain. Then he gave it up. He let his head fall forward on the table. One arm, dangling over the side of the chair, came into contact with the brown dog's curly head. He pushed his nose against the limp fingers and his lordship murmured, "Good dog."

Isabel tried to revive the conversation.

"Why has Susan run away, Lee?"

He sighed. "Go to the devil, Isabel."

"Is it true she has run away?"

"I hit her," he said. "I hit her, I hit her."

"Is that why she ran away?"

"It's not that she had a lover," he went on, following his own train of thought, ignoring Isabel's questions. "It's not

that. Though it hurts me. Odd, how much. But it's not that. It's... hell, maybe it is that. But I have never been jealous in my life!"

"What have you accused Susan of?" cried Isabel, horrified. "Lee, she is carrying your child!"

His eyes fell. "Not mine," he muttered.

"Lee... oh, Lee, you haven't! How could you? That poor child!"

"Poor child? *Poor child*? Poor *me*!"

"You are ridiculous! How can you imagine Susan to be capable of such a thing as you suggest. Why, she told me only the other day... can it be you don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"Susan's party. The party she had for Zoe, with the extraordinary flowers."

"I remember that party," he said, vaguely interested. "Nice party."

"Do you remember what happened after that party?"

"After? Good God, it was months ago." His brow lowered. "Was it then I realized she had been out with a man?"

"She didn't go anywhere, Lee, you went out with Gerry and Monteuil, and came home drunk as—if you'll pardon the expression—a lord. Susan told me her child was conceived that night. She was very definite about it."

"I knew she was out with a man!" he cried. "Lady Beauchamp's, she said, and it was patently a lie."

"What on earth has Lady Beauchamp to do with anything?" shouted Isabel. "We are talking about the party you had here in your own house! You went out with 'the boys,' which embarrassed Susan no end, and then came home so swinishly drunk you assaulted your own wife and you don't even remember it! And then you have the gall, the filthy, pig-headed audacity to accuse—"

"*Quiet*!" roared Courtney, and Isabel desisted, still flushed and angry. "Now let me think."

Courtney thought.

"What you say," he pronounced, "is nonsense. If I was too far gone to remember, I was too far gone to be capable. A good try, Bella, but not good enough."

"You can't just dismiss it like that. It's the truth!"

"Like most men, my dear, I have a mortifying experience or two stored deep down in my memory that convince me what *I* say is the truth."

He seemed to have sobered up a good deal, but when Isabel tried to argue the point further with him, he began to explain in graphic detail precisely why he believed what he did about the inhibiting effects of alcohol on male potency. Isabel ground her teeth in fury and humiliation.

"I am not interested," she said icily, "in the details of your personal disasters, but I am convinced you are laboring under a disastrous misconception."

"On that point at least, we can agree," he said sardonically.

Isabel glared at him.

"Lee, you're wrong, just plain wrong. You must believe me!"

His eyes narrowed suddenly.

"Has she sent you here?"

"No! I don't even know where she is. She told me the whole story in confidence, several days ago. She couldn't understand why you seemed to dislike her so."

"Well," he said, "she can now. Though it is a good story, about the night of the party. The timing is nice, and I was devilish dipped, as I recall. Clever. But just a little naive."

"My lord, where is Susan now? Do you know? Or are you too selfish even to care?"

"I instructed her to go to Courtney," he said absently, "so I suppose she is there."

When consulted, Zoe agreed that the first order of priority was to locate Susan, before a first-class scandal could begin to brew. Unlike Isabel, she was inclined to take her brother's word over Susan's, but she took a more philosophical view of the situation.

"Poor child. He neglected her shamefully, you know. Brought her up to Town, introduced her to a few of the right people, squired her to a few balls, and then left her on her own. It was quite to be expected she would find companionship elsewhere. Of course, we didn't realize

until we began to get letters, and then I raced up to take her in hand, but by then it must have been too late. And of course, it's the greatest nonsense for Lee to have expected she would confess. She knew enough of his pride and his temper, I'm sure, to be terrified. All in all, I'm quite sorry for her."

"I'm sorry for her," said Isabel staunchly, "but not because she's got herself in a mess. I'm sorry for her because Lee's got her in a mess of his own making. I'm convinced, absolutely convinced, Zoe, that she was telling me the truth. If you'd heard her yourself, you'd believe it too."

"Well," said Zoe, "you may be right, but so long as Lee won't accept it, it's not much use what any of us believes."

"I think you should come to Courtney, and see what Susan has to say."

"Oh, I fully intend to come to Courtney," said Zoe.

But when the two ladies arrived the following day, towards evening, the castle was empty. Only the kitchen showed signs of life. A fire burned brightly, as Sarah and Joseph sat over their early supper of bread and cheese and mutton broth, but the keep was cold and dark. The bedrooms were damp and musty, the beds unmade. It was clear no one had visited for some time.

This Sarah confirmed. "Not a soul, my lady, since the Heir was here—oh, it must be nearly two months ago. And very bad he looked, my lady, pacing through the night and muttering to himself and walking on the parapet like young Hamlet. I was concerned, my lady."

"Well, he's better now, Sarah," lied Zoe pleasantly. "It was some matter of a debt, I think; and you know how Rayne is when it comes to foolishness with money. But as I recall, Courtney managed to raise the wind without being obliged to apply to him. It was a near thing, though. I think he learned a lesson."

Zoe laughed, as though she found the spectacle of her brother squirming before the spectre of his father's wrath rather amusing, and Sarah looked as though she found such a want of respect deplorable. She had been Zoe's

nurse too, but had never succeeded in instilling in that young lady a proper awe of the Heir.

Zoe and Isabel spent the night in the castle, and contemplated making a detour next day to Queen's Crown. They both agreed that Lord Rayne was the person to bring things to order, but Zoe was very much averse to drawing him in without first consulting Courtney. If Susan had gone to Queen's Crown, she would be safe enough. If she had not, going there would be unlikely to provide any clues. So in the end, they returned straightaway to London.

"Not at Courtney?" scowled Courtney.

By dint of considerable persuasion, he had consented to receive his sister. Although he was in a graceless humor still, and there were dark blue smudges under his eyes and a crease between his brows that threatened to become permanent, he was spruce, in his Persian banian, and sober.

"No, she's not there," repeated Zoe. "Darling, you might offer me a cup of tea. I have only just got down from my traveling coach, which as you know is not the world's most comfortable." She settled herself in the window as Courtney rang for the butler. "Thank you. I take it, you've received no word."

He shook his head.

"And she left without luggage, without retainers, by public conveyance?"

"Presumably. She did take her maid, young woman by the name of Carson."

Zoe sighed. "So very odd. And nothing from Queen's Crown?"

"Oh, Lord! I never thought of that. You don't suppose she's run to earth there?"

In spite of his silks and his engraved brass snuffbox, poised for use, Courtney looked suddenly like a naughty and apprehensive small boy.

"I think, if she had, you'd have heard by now."

"What a nightmare it's going to be. I can't even begin to imagine what he's going to say."

"He will say you should have consulted him before you went off in such a start, that's the first thing he'll say."

"Damn. You're right, aren't you? But I can't be always depositing my troubles in his lap, for God's sake."

"He won't see it as your trouble, my love. He'll see it as a family trouble."

"Oh, hell," said Courtney.

He took the pinch of snuff he had been holding at his wrist. It was not a habit he seriously adopted, but there were times when it was pleasant. His eyes dilated as the sharp, heady sensation was transmitted to his brain, but, in the best style of elegance, he did not sneeze. He closed the box.

"Zo, the damnable thing... you know, the really damnable thing... oh, hell, where is that fool Cole with the tea?"

"The really damnable thing—?" prompted Zoe, unpacking her embroidery from its kidskin case.

"I miss her! If that isn't damnable, I don't know what is. We shall never be reconciled, of course—unthinkable—and we shall never live together again in any significant sense. And that's as it should be. But until it actually blew up the other morning, I cherished a secret hope that somehow... well, I think that's why I couldn't bear to bring Rayne into it, because once he knew—Oh, hell, I don't know what I'm saying. I've been a damn fool from start to finish of this affair of Susan Whalley, that's all."

The brown dog, lying by the fire, raised his head and then padded over to sit by the chair into which Courtney had sunk dejectedly. He patted the dog's head.

"Have you met Brandy? He masquerades as a brute beast, but don't be taken in. He understands the King's English."

Brandy thumped his tail.

"How do you do," said Zoe, and Brandy thumped again.

"Ah, here's Cole at last with the tea."

Once tea had been served and Cole had gone, the conversation was resumed, but only briefly.

"Darling," said Zoe, "you may be right that it's over, but you can't leave the messy ends lying about. If we could minimize the scandal, well, I'd be grateful."

"Oh, my God—Alvers. I'd completely forgotten him and his starchy ways. What a selfish pig I am, so wrapped up in my own affairs I never gave a thought to yours. We've got to hush it up at least till you and Stephen have got to the altar. When's it to be?"

Zoe looked apologetic. "Not till March, I'm afraid."

"Lord! Well, we'll have to find the wench, for a start. I'll send Gustaf to Queen's Crown. He can nose about, and if she's there, or been there, he'll discover it. If it's no go, I suppose she'll have gone home to Hawley, and I'll have to go after her."

He looked slightly ill at the thought, but determined. When Zoe gratefully kissed his brow, he managed to summon up a feeble excuse for a smile.

Gustaf returned from Queen's Crown next day, saying that the Countess was surely not there, and had not been there. Courtney's first feeling was one of relief. At least he would have a breather before confronting Rayne. But it all too soon occurred to him that facing Susan's father would be, if not as daunting, equally distasteful. He tried several times to justify to himself sending Gustaf, or writing a letter. If only he hadn't flown off the handle and struck the girl! But he had, and so, if things were to be patched up at least long enough so that Zoe might not suffer, Courtney would have to go in person.

He felt much aggrieved as he made his way northwards. A fine rain misted down onto his shoulder, and wilted the brim of his tall-crowned hat. The dampness seeped in between his gloves and his coatsleeves, so that his cuffs chafed clammily as he handled the reins. His horse was bored and balky, shying at puddles, drifting obstinately towards the green grass at the edge of the road. Courtney jerked impatiently at her mouth, once, as she ducked her head to snatch a mouthful, and the mare stopped dead. The more her rider cursed and kicked, the more offended she was, and the less inclined to move. It seemed there was nothing to do, short of cutting her

flanks to ribbons, but get off and walk. Courtney dismounted and led her, his boots squelching in the mud. Coming to a crossroads, with a clear stretch of road beyond, he spoke to her politely. Mollified, the mare accepted him in the saddle again, and they set off at an easy trot.

After that, the journey improved. The rain ceased to fall, and the sky steadily lightened for a short while, before succumbing to the onset of night. Dusk had set in by the time Courtney cantered into the courtyard of the Royal Arms. He braced himself for curious inquiries, but though the innkeeper recognized him immediately, and did ask any number of questions, he did not seem to know of Susan's return home, and in fact seemed to assume she was still in London. Courtney thanked heaven for the girl's sense of discretion, which was rather nice after all. He dined amply on the inn's plain, hearty fare, and sent a note round to Mrs. Whalley, announcing his intention of calling in the morning. He bedded comfortably in the rooms he had occupied before, and, having received no counter-indication from Mrs. Whalley by breakfast-time, set off for the Squire's house.

Courtney had prepared himself for evasiveness, hostility, recriminations. He had steeled himself against sighs, tears, swoons, harsh words, stern admonitions, even threats. What he encountered was genuine surprise and delight at his arrival. The girls squealed and clamored. Mrs. Whalley fluttered in her sweet, muddle-headed way, and offered him a second breakfast. And even the Squire's manner, though stiff and not entirely cordial, was proper and polite. Obviously, none of the family knew that anything was amiss, and they all demanded news of Susan. Courtney, inwardly much taken aback, lied fluently. He spoke of Susan's friends in London, her social success, and invented messages for each member of her family. He alluded casually to the apocryphal business that brought him into Ely, and regretted that he had not been able to bring Susan with him, and by mid-morning he took his leave, fatigued and disgruntled.

Returning to the inn on his borrowed horse, he retrieved the mare, who, at first indignant at having her much deserved rest in the stables cut short, soon found the weather irresistible. It was one of those gloriously crisp, sunny winter days with a tantalizing and deceitful touch of spring in the air, one of those aggressively cheerful days which, when one's mood is clouds and gloom, can be infinitely depressing. The mare trotted forward jauntily, head up, ears forward. Her rider slumped in the saddle.

Where was Susan? If she had not gone to Courtney, as ordered, if she had not gone to her husband's home or to her own home, where *had* she gone?

# *XIII*

Mr. Wimpole was an unprepossessing little man. Not even his best friends could honestly assert that Mr. Wimpole projected anything but an unrelieved aspect of insignificance. He was neither tall nor short, neither stout nor thin. His hair was of an indeterminate shade between dark and light, and was invariably half hidden anyway by an inexpressibly nondescript hat. Beneath the rim of this hat, Mr. Wimpole's countenance was neither sufficiently handsome nor sufficiently repulsive to be in any way remarkable, and no one, not even Mrs. Wimpole, ever seemed to know what clothes he was wearing. He moved neither fast nor slow, neither briskly nor sluggishly; his method of locomotion was indefinite, and one never knew if he was coming or going, or indeed whether he had just left or was to be expected momentarily.

With such natural gifts, it was almost predetermined that Mr. Wimpole should become a detective. It might be expected, in the interests of consistence, that Mr. Wimpole should have become a detective of the most negligible sort, but in point of fact he was a very good detective. Under the nondescript hat, under the unremarkable hair, he concealed a brain of considerable astuteness and an acute faculty for observation. And, to complement his natural talents, Mr. Wimpole had acquired the knack of blending harmoniously into any surroundings. He could converse comfortably in any English dialect, from Cockney cant to Oxfordese; he could look equally at home in hired court clothes or a tattered topcoat from a City pawnshop. Mr. Wimpole

was a fine detective. He was Sir John Fielding's pride, the best of the Bow Street Runners.

When Mr. Wimpole was let into the house in Grosvenor Square, the butler most properly enquired of his name, as the man had no card—or rather, he had quite a number, but none engraved, "Mr. H. Wimpole, Detective." By the time, however, that Cole reached the door of his lordship's study, he was much annoyed to find that he had forgotten the name, an unprecedented occurrence. Walpole, was it? Or was it Wembley?

"A Mr. Wmblr to see you, my lord," announced Cole, with a marble countenance. He paused imperceptibly, in the hope that his lordship would unconsciously bail him out.

He did. Courtney looked up from the writing table where he had for half an hour been engaged in penning concentric circles on an old invitation. He glanced at a memorandum.

"Ah, yes. Mr. Wimpole, is it? Send him in then."

He felt an urge to resume the exercise of penning circles, but fought it down and, instead, crumpled the pasteboard and hastily shoved it into a drawer as Mr. Wimpole made his quiet grey-brown way into the room.

"But surely this cannot be Beaumont's crack detective!" thought Courtney.

He reminded himself that Lord Stephen had warned him not to be put off by appearances. "Looks like he couldn't find his way out of a barn, Hunter, but inside—mind like a steel trap. Did a job of work for my dad once; first class performance. Quick, no nonsense, and not a breath of it ever leaked out." Courtney felt he had little choice but to try him.

"Mr. Wimpole."

He quailed at the thought of exposing his private life to this expressionless little man. But he gritted his teeth, and, passing a hand briefly over his eyes, plunged.

"Mr. Wimpole, I should be very grateful if you would put your talents—which come to me highly recommended—to the location of my wife. She is very young, and impressionable. We had a quarrel a few days

ago, and I am afraid she has run away. I have no idea where she has gone. She has not gone to my estate in Kent, nor to my father's, nor home to her own family, nor to any of her close friends. I have a list for you of those relatives she has mentioned, but I can't recall any that she was particularly attached to. I am at a stand, Mr. Wimpole. I hope you will be able to help me."

Mr. Wimpole would be honored to do his lordship any service that was in his power to do. If he might presume to put a few questions to his lordship?

Courtney acquiesced, and by the time Mr. Wimpole left the study, he was in possession of all the facts at his lordship's disposal. He knew that her ladyship had vanished on Tuesday, with a bandbox and a maid named Nancy Carson. She had been driven by his lordship's coachman through St. James's Park as far as the Horseguards, and had there alighted, with the maid and the bandbox, leaving orders that if she had not returned in two hours the coachman was to return to Grosvenor Square. The coachman had waited, and then returned to Grosvenor Square around noon. When last seen, her ladyship had been wearing a green and white dimity morning dress and a camel-colored cloak; the maid had been wearing dark blue. As to physical characteristics, the maid was fair, healthy-looking and countrified; the Countess was smallish, dark, with large brown eyes.

"And newly with child," added Courtney, in a smothered sort of voice.

Mr. Wimpole duly noted the smothered characteristic of the voice. He meticulously went over the list of relatives, asked questions about Nancy's people that Courtney couldn't answer, and then ventured, quite placidly, to ask if his lordship had any reason to think that her ladyship might have been driven to desperate measures.

"Dear God in heaven!" cried Courtney. "You don't think she's flung herself into the river, or such a thing as that? Sweet Christ, I'd never forgive myself! I would ... Oh, God, how could I ever—"

He broke off, and it was with a strong effort that he

managed to get a grip on himself. It was obviously the first time the thought had occurred to him.

'Mr. Wimpole hastened to assure his lordship that never, in his considerable experience, had a suicide taken the trouble of providing himself with a servant and a bandbox. No, it was desperate measures of a sort that involved quasi-medical procedures practiced by certain unscrupulous—

"Oh, God, no. Who knows what sort of hands she might fall into? Even the best..."

Remembering his own suggestion, he was forced to tell Wimpole that it was possible she had sought to terminate the pregnancy, but he thought it unlikely, as her natural inclinations were very much against it.

Mr. Wimpole, perceiving that his lordship was now distracted and upset, took his leave. Availing himself of permission to mix discreetly with the servants, he agreed to a friendly cup of tea below stairs and in the course of the next hour managed to discover a number of extremely private things. He pieced together a pretty accurate picture of the personal relations of the Earl and his wife. This line of research, however, though it might shed light on a possible motive for her ladyship's flight, did not seem to offer any clues to the direction of that flight. So Mr. Wimpole consigned the list of Susan's and Nancy's relatives to his pocket, for future reference, and made his way to St. James' Park.

So. The Countess had left her carriage, with a maid and a bandbox. As Wimpole saw it, a lady was not likely to lug a bandbox about with her for long, even if she did have a maid to carry it. It was therefore logical to assume that the lady would attempt to stash it somewhere, and if it was important enough to bring with her, it was probably too important to chuck under a bush. Therefore, it was probable that, having left her private carriage, the lady would immediately seek out some public means of conveyance for herself, her maid, and the conspicuous bandbox. It was not probable that she would proceed northwards to the fashionable Mall, where she would risk meeting up with an acquaintance, but most

likely that she would proceed into the park out of sight of the coachman, and then southwards to Birdcage Walk.

Accordingly, Wimpole set out from his position on Horseguards Road, and followed the path he believed the Countess to have taken. He stopped to pass the time of day with a ragged old woman selling ragged old clumps of asters. He paused to buy a paper of pins from a hungry-looking boy. A few minutes later, he emerged onto Birdcage Walk and meandered down to where the hackney coachmen clustered about Storey Gate. He addressed a casual remark to one of the jarveys, and in a very short time an animated discussion had sprung up, while Wimpole leaned quietly against a post and listened, forgotten by all until, with a slightly diffident air, he approached and asked to be driven somewhere. Arriving at an irrelevant destination in the Strand, he got out of the carriage, and, drawing out his watch, engaged the jarvey, a florid and voluble young man, in conversation. At the end of a reasonable time, he consulted his watch again, shrugged as if he had given up on whomever he had been expecting, paid the driver, adding a tip neither lavish nor parsimonious, and wandered off. He cut into a small side street, walked three sides round the block, emerged again into the Strand, and entered unobtrusively a genteel little hotel two streets up and on the opposite side of the road from where he had got out of the hackney cab.

In the hotel, he engaged a room for the night, ordered his dinner for half past five precisely, and, having inspected his room, spent a quarter of an hour in the lobby. He bought a newspaper from an eager young man with frequently mended shoes, and, finding him well disposed for a chat, passed a moment or two in talk. Then he sat down in an easy chair and read his paper. At five o'clock, he returned to his room for dinner, stopping by the maid's room to exchange civilities, and possibly tender a small pecuniary consideration. At half-past five, he ate his dinner. Then he left the hotel. He went home to his modest apartments not far away, in Covent Garden, and passed a comfortable evening with Mrs. Wimpole and the two little Wimpoles. Later, he went back to the

hotel, to sleep in the bed he had paid for, and checked out in a perfectly unexceptional manner early next morning. He then made his way to Grosvenor Square.

Cole was not pleased to see him. Cole had taken a severe dislike to the man from the very moment his name had proved itself so eminently forgettable. Cole had become even less well disposed towards Mr. Wimpole, if possible, when he heard his pleasing manners praised in the kitchen. What improper goings-on there might have been in the kitchen while Cole was absent, he did not know, and he thought it decidedly odd that he should have been called upstairs on some trivial matter that dragged out unreasonably during all the time Wimpole had been chatting in the kitchen. But Cole's was not to reason why.

"Mr. Wimpole is below, my lord," he announced austerely. "Shall I tell him you are not yet receiving?"

"No, no," replied Courtney, bolting out of bed and into his dressing gown, held adroitly for him by his valet. He shoved his tousled hair up under a nightcap, a gold-embroidered turban-like affair whose sole purpose in life was to impress early morning visitors, and thrust his feet into embroidered moroccan slippers.

"Show the man up. I'll see him at once."

By the time Wimpole had been conducted upstairs, Courtney's face was hidden under a mass of white lather, and Gustaf was advancing on him with a wicked but efficient-looking blade. Courtney made a greeting of the briefest, and informed Wimpole that he might make his report unreservedly. Gustaf went about his business.

Wimpole reported that his researches were going satisfactorily. Her ladyship did not appear to have made any particular effort to cover her tracks. She had hired a closed carriage at Storey's Gate, and had been driven directly up Whitehall into the Strand, to a small hotel where she and her maid had spent two nights. She had made a brief sortie in a hired carriage on the afternoon of the day of her arrival, and had received a caller on the morning of the next day. The caller had given no name, but had been escorted by the waiting maid to her

ladyship's room. He had left after perhaps half an hour. There had been no other visitors, and her ladyship had not gone out again till she left the hotel.

Courtney's face, now shorn of lather and whiskers together, was not pleasant.

"Have you a description of the mysterious gentleman caller?" he asked.

Wimpole had. The gentleman caller had been described as rather tall, very dark, well dressed, perhaps foreign, though no one had heard him speak and Wimpole had found that serving girls tended to think everyone who was dark must be foreign, until it was proved otherwise.

Courtney frowned.

"All this is assuming, of course, you have the right woman. Are you entirely certain?"

Wimpole was certain. The lady in question not only fit the description in (Wimpole coughed discreetly) all respects, but her bandbox bore the black horse crest, and she had gone by the name of Mrs. Hunter.

"Well," said Courtney, "that seems clear enough."

Wimpole was glad his lordship was satisfied that the lady was indeed Lady Lakewood.

Courtney posed a few more questions, largely for the sake of form, for Wimpole really had left nothing out, and in a short while the detective was on his way back to the hotel in the Strand. At first he was sanguine about identifying the dark man, and also about discovering where her ladyship had gone on her single outing from the hotel. But he found that the driver who had conducted her ladyship both on her expedition and her final departure from the hotel had gone away to visit his sick mother in East Croyden. And the dark man appeared to be untraceable. He had come to the hotel on foot, and had left again on foot. Wimpole had no great opinion of people who walked, especially well and quietly dressed people who walked without limps or distinctive postures.

After a day or two of fruitlessly making inquiries in the vicinity of the hotel in the Strand, Wimpole determined upon a jaunt to East Croyden. Although he knew little

about Sam Torpey, the cab driver, and less about his mother, and although there was some danger of unwittingly crossing Mr. Torpey on his way back to London as Wimpole was leaving it, there seemed to be no other course open but waiting, and waiting idly was anathema to Wimpole.

Accordingly, he set out for East Croyden. The journey itself was a simple enough matter, but locating Mrs. Torpey was rather less so. She did not live in East Croyden proper, but somewhere in the surrounding countryside, apparently, according to the local clergyman. Wimpole endured fully twenty minutes of remorseless good-natured rambling before it became clear the Mrs. Torpey was not, however, a member of Mr. Whistlethwaite's parish. Mr. Whistlethwaite thought perhaps she belonged to the adjoining parish on the east, no, possibly the north side. Or perhaps she was not a churchgoer at all. If the truth be told, Mr. Whistlethwaite really did not know anything about Mrs. Torpey at all. If Wimpole had been the swearing sort, he would have sworn.

Next, he looked up the village's medical men. If Mrs. Torpey was ill enough to be visited by her son from London on that account, surely she was being cared for by a doctor. There were three in the vicinity. Wimpole visited them all. The last, appearing after Wimpole had tracked him to two separate patients' homes and missed him each time and returned to his own home, finally not only knew Mrs. Torpey but knew where she lived. He gave Wimpole detailed directions, but unhappily neglected to mention an extra farmhouse, which made his directions quite misleading. Wimpole took a wrong turning, and had to retrace his steps for a considerable distance before discovering the proper turning, in rather a different position from that described by the doctor. When at long last the detective arrived at the cottage where Mrs. Torpey resided, he knew in his bones that Mr. Torpey would not be there. Mrs. Torpey, elderly, suspicious, and irritable at length confirmed this. Mr. Torpey had returned to London several hours before. Disgusted but not dis-

mayed, Wimpole returned to London himself, and found the young man at his habitual post outside the little hotel in the Strand.

Once this contact was finally made, Wimpole's troubles were over. Sam Torpey proved to be a friendly and talkative soul. By evening, Wimpole had what he considered a reasonably complete dossier to present to his lordship, only of course, being Wimpole, he thought it should have been ready two days earlier.

"So," said Courtney, "you have the full particulars."

He paced nervously from his writing desk to the window and back again, while Wimpole waited politely to be told to begin. Courtney composed his features into several different expressions before settling upon one satisfactorily stern and reserved. It degenerated rapidly into one of sincere interest and anxiety.

"Well, let me have 'em, your full particulars, Mr. Wimpole."

Wimpole took out a sheet of notepaper and, lowering his eyes, read out a schema of events.

3:15 A.M., December 4, Tuesday, her ladyship had left her hotel and gone round to Cadogan Street, where she had left a note with the maid at Number 23.

"Damme," said Courtney. "That's Chelsea!"

She had then, continued Mr. Wimpole, returned to her hotel.

On the morning of the next day, December 5, at approximately 11 A.M., the gentleman caller put in his appearance. The description of this gentleman and a gentleman residing at Number 23, Cadogan Street were so similar as to admit of the conclusion that they were almost certainly one and the same man.

Courtney refrained, somehow, from interrupting to demand his name.

On the next morning, December 6, at 9:00 A.M., her ladyship departed the hotel, and was driven by the same cab driver as previously to the same destination as previously. She alighted, rang the bell at Number 23, and was admitted. Shortly thereafter, another hired carriage, a traveling carriage, was brought round. Her ladyship

then emerged from Number 23, in company with the same dark gentleman as previously, and, in company with that same gentleman and her maid, her ladyship entered the chaise and was driven off.

"Good God, man, where to?" cried Courtney.

It was believed by the servants at Number 23 that it had been the gentleman's intention to journey to France.

"France?" cried Courtney.

It was not known whether her ladyship intended to accompany him to France, or merely to Dover, or possibly to some intermediate point along the way. It was Wimpole's intention to set out immediately, if his lordship so desired, to ascertain—

"This gentleman," he interrupted. "Am I correct in assuming this dark gentleman was a French gentleman, going by the name of Comte de Monteuil?"

Wimpole gave his lordship to believe that this was so, and added as well a long string of personal names to which, it seemed, M. de Monteuil also laid claim.

"Oh, hell. Oh, *hell*!" said his lordship, and brought his fist down on the table with a resounding crash.

Mr. Wimpole, always a man of discretion, quietly withdrew.

# *XIV*

At about the time Mr. Wimpole was first being ushered into the house in Grosvenor Square, Susan was on the dock at Dover, congratulating herself. She had, with what she felt to be admirable spirit and strength of character, launched herself on an adventure.

M. de Monteuil glanced at her with a benign expression in his black eyes, as he handed her up the gangway.

"*Nous voici, ma belle*. And the wind is on our side now. You are certain, Madame, that you wish to take this journey with me?"

Susan peered over the railing down at the changing peaks and valleys of greenish water far below the level of her feet.

"Yes, monsieur, I am certain. You are very kind to let me come along." She smiled at him. "But I was sure you would not refuse to help me."

"I am so obliging?"

"You have always been very kind to me, Monty."

"But of course, Madame. *Qui pourrait vous résister*?" He took her arm and pointed. "You see, the captain is giving the signal to cast off. In a very few moments, we shall be on our way to France. Look at all the activity, everyone running here and there. I have always liked the sailing. *Ho, là*! The last cable! *Nous sommes lancés*!"

He laughed as the neat sloop veered round into the wind and gave a healthy buck which sent the spray up over the bows and covered them both with a fine mist.

"Do you not find it exciting, Madame?"

"Oh, yes," said Susan, holding with one hand to her hat

and the other to the railing. She laughed too as she felt the wind whip her skirts round her ankles. "But it gets rather cold, after a while. Might I go downstairs?"

"'Below,' *ma chère*. On a ship, it is 'below.'" He smiled. "But of course you may go below. You are my guest, *comtesse*. You may go where you like."

With a gallant bow and a proffered arm, he escorted her to a comfortable little cabin furnished as a parlor. Susan pulled off her hat, repaired in a small round mirror the damage done to her hair by the wind, and then sat down.

"May I offer you a glass of wine, Suzanne?"

The Count poured a golden glass of madeira, and set it on the table in front of her. He stood beside it, seeming very tall in the little room.

"Now, my pretty child, you must tell me what is this business of yours in France. You said you did not wish to speak of it till we were under way. Now we are, and I wish to know... your intentions." He smiled just a little, then the smile faded. "You are aware, I hope, of the gravity of the indiscretion we are committing?"

Susan's eyes widened anxiously.

"Surely it is not so bad as all that? We shall be across the Channel in only a few hours, and my maid is with me, and... and besides, who's to know anything about it?"

"Precisely, *ma petite amour*. Who is to know what we do in these few hours?"

Susan wondered where, as a matter of fact, her maid was.

"You are twisting the sense of my words, Monsieur." She raised her chin. "And I am not your *petite amour*. You must not say such things. I asked only for passage to France on your ship, and you agreed."

"Do you complain? Are you not now on my ship? I have not yet failed you, have I?"

Now thoroughly ill at ease, she glanced round. "Where is Nancy?"

Monteuil laughed.

"My darling girl, calm yourself. Life is for living. Why do you wish to hide from it?"

Susan turned enormous, reproachful eyes on the smiling figure that loomed over her. It occurred to her that, for all they had been quite friendly, she had never been alone with this man before, for more than a few minutes in her own carriage. Did all men become predatory as soon as they had a woman in their power?

The Count gave a shrug of exasperation.

"What a face! For one moment I let you know that you are in my eyes a desirable woman, and you behave as if I had attempted to commit a crime! Are you so naive as that, little Countess?"

"I'm afraid I am. I had thought you were attached to my sister-in-law."

His eyes glittered angrily, but his expression remained nonchalant.

"If I were, Madame, I should not undertake to remain celibate for all my life, while she marries another man. What an absurd notion! But let us put this unprofitable subject aside, and return to the question of your business in France. What is it? I shall be glad to oblige you, Madame, in any way possible."

He smiled, and if there was a touch of irony in his voice, Susan took it as natural in a man whose vanity has been offended.

"Well," she said, folding her hands in her lap, "perhaps you could oblige me with the name of... of an agreeable convent."

"A convent? Do you mean to take up the veil?"

"Oh, no! Nothing so drastic as that, I assure you. I just want to stop for a bit, to be quiet and think things over. It's what one does, you know, when one finds life hard—one retires to a convent."

"I see," said the Count, whose familiarity with the romantic novel was sufficient to enable him to recognize this precept. "But your husband has not been brought into your confidence in this matter?"

"Well, no."

"In other words, you have run away from him. Lady Lakewood, you have put me in a very awkward position."

"I daresay it is a bit awkward," she agreed, looking all

contrition. "I do beg your pardon, but I had no one else to turn to."

"*Eh, bien*, since it is already awkward, I do not see that you must go to a convent. You would be welcome in my chateau, not far from Boulogne. No, don't look alarmed. I myself will be in Paris. But you could be more private, and considerably more comfortable, than in a convent."

Susan continued to look horrified.

"Oh, dear, no, Monty! Even if you were not there, it could not fail to compromise us both, much worse than a short trip across the Channel. Indeed, you are very kind to invite me, but it would put you in infinitely more awkward a position than you are now. I daresay my lord would even be obliged to call you out."

"Oh, my dear!" laughed Monteuil.

"You think not? Well, perhaps Hunter is not really that sort. But I'm sure he would be very much displeased. He has... humors."

"He has a nasty temper, you mean, Madame. I am aware of that. And I consider it quite certain that he will call me out as soon as he discovers where you have gone."

Susan was distressed.

"You think he'll challenge you just because you gave me a lift on your boat?"

"But of course. My little innocent, I have aided you in deserting him. He will naturally assume that we are lovers."

"Oh, but..." Considering that he already believed she had a lover, Susan had to admit this was probably true. But she asserted valiantly, "You'll explain. Tell him how I said I would go on the common packet-boat. He'll see you couldn't let me do that. I don't think he... I mean, he can't like to fight!"

"But he does, my dear. He is very much the sort for dueling—cool in the head and warm in the heart. He has fought at least twice, to my certain knowledge. In one case his opponent recovered; in the other, he did not. My lord Courtney is not a fencer, but he is an excellent shot."

"Not recovered? You mean he *killed* somebody?"

Susan found she was pulling destructively at the lace

on her handkerchief, and forced herself to stop. Monteuil nodded, not very interested.

"What was it about, the quarrel?" asked Susan.

He shrugged. "Who remembers? A woman, a game at cards, a wager, perhaps—the usual."

Susan got up and wandered about the room.

"Does it astonish you, Madame? Duels are not infrequent in our society, and frequently men die of them. Courtney himself might have died, just as easily as the other man."

"Yes, I suppose so. I'm sure it was a fair fight. But all the same, it's unsettling."

She began to think what her life would have been like if Lord Courtney had died in that forgotten duel, some years ago. She would never have met him, never known him, never loved him, never cried over him. Blinking back sudden tears, she asked again for Nancy.

"Of course, Madame," said Monteuil, and Nancy was called immediately.

When Nancy came, her face was rather green, her mouth drawn, her eyes tired. The greenness was due to the motion of the yacht on the sea, but the tired, drawn look was mostly due to the young maid's anxiety over the step her mistress was taking. Nancy had done her best to dissuade her, but argument and pleading had been of no avail, and though she had once or twice considered dispatching a note to his lordship, Nancy was too loyal to resort to treachery. So here she was, tossing about on the Channel, and not at all happy about it.

Susan herself was getting less and less happy about it. Monteuil had made her realize for the first time that if her flight was brave, it was also rash, and bid fair to be dangerous as well. She wondered if she should not have gone to Courtney Castle as her husband had ordered her to do. It might have been difficult, and there would have been some dismal times when she remembered the daisies and the laughter of the summertime, but it would have been secure, and there would have been people to watch out for her. Here she had no one but an abigail as ill at ease as herself and a man she hardly knew. Susan resolved

to write to her husband the moment she got to shore.

The moment she got to shore, however, Susan found that the excitement of being in a foreign country overpowered for a time the desire to go home. The ancient cobbled streets and quays of Boulogne charmed her, and the bustle of the merchant ships tying up and unloading was fascinating. After a short time of watching and providing explanations, Monteuil led his party to a small tavern off the central square which exuded wonderful smells of baked fish with herbs and mulled wine. Susan discovered she was ravenous. Her spirits rose rapidly.

"Well, Monsieur," she said cheerily, leaning back from the table and her empty plate, "what about my convent? You say you know of one that will take me as a lodger. Or shall I simply tour the countryside knocking on doors? I have enough money to make myself welcome, I think, most places."

"I have been considering your requirements, Madame, and I think the convent I have in mind will suit you—if you still insist you cannot accept my own hospitality?"

"Oh, no, absolutely not. Thank you," said Susan, and Nancy breathed a sigh of relief.

Monteuil smiled, and bowed a little in his chair.

"In that case, perhaps you will permit me to escort you to this charming convent I know in the morning, on my way to Paris. I shall pass the night in that modest hostelry across the square, but I think you would prefer a less spartan accommodation. I will conduct you to your hotel when you say."

Susan agreed to go immediately, and was duly conveyed to a more genteel but still modest hotel a short distance away. She arranged with the Count to meet at half-past seven in the morning in the central square around the corner, and then he went away, leaving Susan and her maid to themselves at last.

"Well, I must own, Nan," said the Countess, "I am beginning to think this something of a bird-witted scheme—as you have tactfully maintained from the start. We are lucky to have Monteuil. What we should have

done without him, I swear I do not know. He has been invaluable—except for those few moments on board ship when I was afraid he imagined I was running away with him!"

"Oh, no, my lady," protested Nancy.

"Well, there was nothing in it. He was only taking stock, I think. Men are such beasts! But when I professed myself much offended by his behavior, he desisted politely."

"Oh, my lady, I am so happy to be off that dreadful ship!"

Susan smiled rather ruefully.

"I feel the same, I think. But tomorrow we shall be safe as houses in our convent. And tonight, I shall write that letter."

Nancy finished buttoning up her mistress's nightdress and provided pen and paper with all speed, before she could change her mind.

As Susan sat down to write, it occurred to her that she had forgotten to enquire the name of the convent.

"What a nuisance! Well, I shall write it anyway, and leave a blank to fill in in the morning. It's a pity, for it might have been posted tonight, but I daresay it won't make much difference when it gets there."

She sharpened her quill meticulously, and broke off the point twice through excess of zeal. She also took care to choose the smoothest and finest piece of stationery, and rearranged herself several times in her chair. Finally, she put pen to paper and wrote,

"Dear Lee—"

After a moment of thoughtful reflection, chewing on the end of the pen, she scratched this salutation out and wrote beside it,

"Dear Hunter—"

After a few more moments of thought, she crumpled the sheet and took another.

"My lord," she wrote, "I am sending this letter to inform you..."

The second sheet followed the first into the grate.

"Nancy!" cried the Countess. "I don't know what to say! Tell me what to write—there's a good girl, Nan. I can't do it on my own."

"You must, my lady. All you need say is where you are and that you are sorry if he has been distressed on your account."

"And that he is not to blame Monteuil, for I cajoled him into it."

Nancy, who privately thought that Monteuil was very much to blame, said nothing. A few minutes later, however, she suggested that her ladyship use one or two sheets for drafting, and then make a final copy when she was satisfied with her composition.

"Of course! Otherwise I shall find all of my paper is in the basket. I am so stupid! It is very hard, Nan. He was so angry with me when last I saw him."

Heroically, she resisted the urge to put her head down on the table and sob. Instead, she smoothed out the most recently crumpled sheet and set to work again. Many minutes and blots and scorings-out later, she read aloud for Nancy's approval.

> "'My lord—
> I am writing to apprise you of my present residence: the———Convent, near Boulogne, France. I realize, upon reflection, that the precipitate nature of my Departure may have caused you some Inconvenience, and if so, I am sorry for it. On the whole, I wish I had not run away, but there is no help for it now. I am resolved for the future to take whatever course you think best, so please write and tell me what to do, and I will do it.'"

Here there was inserted a sentence that was not read aloud to the abigail:

> 'Please do not think hardly of me, for you are quite, quite mistaken.'

"And, Nan, I end it:

'I am truly your faithful and loving wife,
Susan.'

"It begins quite nicely, I think, but the end is not very dignified. Still, I don't know how else to say it. What do you think?"

"I think it is a fine letter, my lady. I think perhaps 'France' after 'Boulogne' might—"

"Yes, of course. What other Boulogne could there be?" Susan struck 'France.' "I didn't mention Monteuil, you see, because I couldn't think of how to explain it without using his name, and if by chance this letter gets to my lord before he finds out it was Monty, there'd be no point in giving him away. Since Monteuil was so sure he would be vexed, I mean." She looked at the letter again, and wrinkled her nose. "Do you think, Nan, just at the end, I should perhaps not say... oh God!"

Quite unexpectedly, she burst into tears, and cried for several minutes, as though her heart would break. Nancy fussed and fidgeted, and tried to comfort her, much disturbed.

"It's all right," said Susan finally. "It's just because we are alone here, and unsettled, and it's foreign, and we are tired. I'll just copy over my letter, and we'll go right to bed."

But in the fair copy of her letter, Susan omitted the word "loving."

In the morning, however, everything looked much better. The sun shone in a sky of gentle blue, and the air was balmy. While Nancy packed up, Susan reinserted "loving" into her letter. Then they had some breakfast, settled their accounts, and set out early for their appointment with the Count. Early as they were, he was there waiting for them, with a nondescript closed carriage into which they climbed quickly while the Count, apparently impatient, ordered the coachman to be off.

Fairly soon, they reached the main Paris road, down which they traveled for about seven miles. Susan and her

maid settled back, watching the unfamiliar countryside pass by, and commenting on things that were strange and things that were homelike. Monteuil was his usual urbane self. At a crossroads, they turned westward onto a smaller, less well traveled road, and later onto a still smaller road, scarcely more than a track.

"Are you sure, Monty, there is a convent here?" asked Susan, bouncing nearly to the ceiling as the carriage went into a rut.

"Certainly, Madame. This is my territory. A retired location, you know, is considered an advantage for a religious house. The further the good sisters are from the world, the less they need fear worldly distraction."

"Well, that makes sense," said Susan.

She continued to feel somewhat uneasy, however, until the coach rounded a particularly rough bend, and she found herself confronting a convent that corresponded perfectly to her imaginings of what a convent should be. There was a grey stone wall, around an architectural arrangement of long, low buildings roofed with round red tiles like those which formed a slanting top to the wall. The enclosure wall was marked by little niches at regular intervals, containing plaster of Paris figures of saints. Above the wrought-iron gate, in a stone arch, was carved the name "Sacré Coeur de la Sainte Vièrge" and to the right of the gate was a plaque, well polished and engraved, "Soeurs de Sion, 1623." It was not as grand and popish as Susan had anticipated, except perhaps for the niches, but it was austere and spiritual and certainly retired. Susan thought it might do quite well.

When the coach pulled up at the gate and the coachman rang the bell, they waited for some minutes before a rather flustered middle-aged woman in a dark habit came half walking, half running to open the door with a large iron key. She had a kind, sweet face that was lined and brown like a peasant's, and when she heard that the two ladies were desirous of making a stay at the convent, she smiled and said some friendly-sounding things in a heavy patois. Susan caught only the words "*jolie petite*" and "*Anglaise*" and "*roses*," the last

accompanied by gestures which indicated that the brown-faced sister was in charge of the rose garden, which she would show to Susan if she liked.

Susan said "*Merci beaucoup, ma soeur*," which pleased the sister mightily. She smiled again, a broad peasant smile full of good humor. Susan thought that if everyone spoke as she did, it would be difficult to understand, but if everyone was as pleasant, it wouldn't much matter about talking. But Marie-Thérèse, the brown-faced sister, turned out to be a native of the region who had never lost her native accent. The other sisters came from all over France, and most of them had learned to speak in the standard dialect of Paris. The Reverend Mother was in fact Parisian, and Susan had no difficulty at all in understanding her. M. Piquart the music master had done his job well.

Reverend Mother, in her spare little office at one end of the cloister, was stiff but gracious. She seemed to find nothing untoward about Susan's wish to live among the sisters. She knew M. le Comte very well by name and by reputation, and anyone who came on his recommendation was more than welcome. As to the question of room and board, a sum was named and agreed to. It seemed to Susan a very small sum, but Reverend Mother made it clear that if she wished to make any additional gift to the Holy Virgin through the mediary of the Sisters of Zion, such a gift would be appreciated. Susan ventured to suggest a sum for that purpose, and Reverend Mother's graciousness increased as she pocketed the purse. A new pair of shoes, she thought, for Marie-Bernarde, enough salt to last the winter, a couple of bags of fine sugar, a new hoe, possibly a wheelbarrow, and of course, some altar cloths that would be the official gift of Madame la Comtesse de Courtenai.

While Reverend Mother and Monteuil chatted quietly in an arch of the cloister, Susan consented to be shown round the modest grounds by Sister Marie-Thérèse. All the care and attention of the sisters seemed to be lavished on the gardens. The buildings were stark, though very clean. A small, rather bare chapel shared with Reverend

Mother's office one end of the elongated 'H' of the building complex, and the other end housed the dining room and kitchens. In the middle stretched a cloister that opened onto fifteen narrow cells. The gardens, like the building, were divided into three main portions. At the front, between the gate and the convent, there were grassy beds and several large trees which, said Marie-Thérèse enthusiastically, flowered miraculously in the spring. To the sides, behind the office and the kitchens, nature was allowed to range wild: pines and deciduous trees, now bare, straggled about, and some low brambly bushes Susan thought might be wild roses sprawled among the gnomish outbuildings that clustered behind the dining room. At the back of the building, facing the cloister, was the real garden, carefully subdivided. There were several vegetable plots, each worked by a pair of sisters; there was a small orchard, which included two apple trees, one peach, one pear, and two cherries. In the middle of the garden was a small pool, surmounted by a statue of the Virgin with a brightly painted red heart. And to the other side were the flowerbeds. Now they were bare of all but herbaceous borders and cut-back roses, and a few tenacious crysanthemums, but Marie-Thérèse described the way they looked in summer. Here, a rainbow. Here, pink as a baby's toes. Susan unconsciously put a hand on her belly. Here, gold like a purseful of louis; here, splashed with red like the blood of a saint whose name Susan didn't catch; there, purple shreds of the hem of Caesar's robe. Susan, startled but delighted with the analogies, thought that surely she would like Sister Marie-Thérèse best of all.

After the tour out of doors, Susan was shown the tiny bare cell where she and Nancy were to sleep. The sight of the cold stone walls and the narrow, hard pallet filled her with momentary dismay, but then she reminded herself sternly that she had not come to recline in the lap of luxury. When Reverend Mother offered to have a second mattress put on each bed, and find extra blankets, Susan pronounced herself well satisfied. Especially, she added to Monteuil, in English, if there would be more blankets.

Monteuil expressed his confidence that there would be, if Reverend Mother promised them.

"And now, my dear, if you are quite happy, I think I must be on my way," said the Count, and Susan was quick to express her thanks and her contrition at having delayed him.

"And could you possibly do me one more favor, Monty?"

"With pleasure," he said.

"I have a letter here," she said, drawing it out of her pocket. "I meant to post it at Boulogne, but I had not the name of this place. If I might have a pen..." Reverend Mother brought her writing box. "There! Now, Monty, would you be so good as to post this, at your very first opportunity? You won't forget?"

"My dear Countess, how could I forget it, as it may save me from a most unpleasant encounter with your husband?"

"I hope so. I mean, once he sees you have taken me to a convent—no one elopes with a lover to a convent!"

She smiled, and Monteuil laughed.

"I think not."

You have been very kind to me, Monty. And I am convinced it is a little for the sake of... a lady who is nearly related to me."

"You persist in viewing me as a figure of high romance, Madame? Well, I will admit to you, it is a little for her sake that I have brought you here."

"You see," smiled Susan, "you are a romantic."

"Perhaps so."

# XV

Lord Courtney decided to take action. The decision did wonders for his morale. The spring came back into his step and the ill-tempered frown disappeared from his forehead, and he began to feel secure enough to allow himself an occasional brandy once more. He spent one final sleepless night in poring over legal-looking papers and certain books, among them the *Code d'Honneur*, and in gathering together maps and passports. Then, in the morning, he left Grosvenor Square and made for his cousin's lodging, one flight up in a decent-looking brick-faced house halfway along Clarges Street.

"Morning, Bickers," said Courtney briskly, to the manservant who opened the door to his knock. "Huntingdale up?"

"Good morning, my lord," said Bickers. "Quite the contrary, my lord; I'm afraid Mr. Huntingdale is not yet receiving."

"Well, it can't be helped," said Courtney. "I'm in a hurry. Important business."

With an apologetic look, Bickers placed himself squarely in the doorway.

"Stand aside, man. I'm coming in. What's all this ceremony? I'll go rouse him, the lazy rogue."

Bickers repeated stolidly, "I am sorry, my lord. Mr. Huntingdale is not yet receiving."

"The devil! He'll receive *me*. Don't be an ass, Bickers; stand aside."

Bickers coughed. "My lord, Mr. Huntingdale is not alone."

Courtney laughed. "I am shocked, Bickers, profoundly

shocked. Who the hell is it, my mother? Now for God's sake—"

He gave the unfortunate Bickers a vigorous shove, which dislodged him forcibly from his position in the doorway, and made for the bedroom.

"Get up, Ger!" he commanded, bursting in without more ado. "Come on, up, up! Serious stuff, Gerry. We're going to France."

"Look 'ere now! You've got a bloody gall!" cried a sleepy-eyed and much disheveled young woman, scuffling with his lordship as he attempted to haul the bedclothes onto the floor, by way of encouraging Gerald to get up. "Who is this cove?" she asked, poking her persecuted protector in the ribs.

Gerald opened one eye and then closed it again.

"Never saw him before in my life."

The girl gave an audible sniff, expressive of disdain mixed with deep disapproval. Relinquishing the bedsheets and the unsalvageable situation together, she clambered down from the bed and sauntered across to the fire, where she stood warming her withers. Courtney ignored her.

"Up, sluggard, get up! Or at least wake up."

"Can't," said Gerald.

"Oh, Christ. Are you drunk?"

"Was. Rather."

"Damn! What time did you come in?"

"Dunno. What time is it?"

When Courtney told him, Gerald emitted a tortured shriek and covered his head with the pillow. Courtney glanced round the room. The girl postured by the chimneypiece.

"For God's sake, woman, where are your clothes?"

She pouted and did not reply.

"Well, you find them, my dear, and take yourself off, or you will find yourself on the street without."

She smirked, and was about to utter some blandishment or other, when Courtney began to advance upon her. Accurately reading the look in his eye, she began to scuttle about the room grabbing at bits of clothing, and

scampered into the parlor with it all in her arms, to the mingled disgust and delight of Bickers. Courtney closed the bedroom door behind her.

Peering out from under his pillow, Gerald was moved to remark, "As the lady says, you've got a bloody gall."

"I know," said Courtney. "So useful when one needs to get things done. Anyway, you won't have time for her this morning. We'll be on the road in a couple of hours."

This, coupled with the previous reference to France, was enough to galvanize Gerald into action. He raised himself up on one elbow, scratched his head vigorously, meticulously stretched each limb, then squirmed up against the pillows until he had reached a sitting position. He folded his hands across his shaggy chest, and looked interested.

"On the road? To France? What's the occasion?"

"A little matter of honor, dear boy."

Gerald brightened. "An *affaire*? The very thing! Haven't had any excitement in months. Except—well, it's hardly the same thing. Proposed to Bella yesterday."

"Proposed? To Isabel?"

"Well, you know, it rather seemed the thing to do."

"Oh, dear. Was it mortifying?"

"Rather. But charming in the end, pretty kisses and all that. Romantic."

"You mean you were in earnest? And she *accepted* you?"

"Whyever should she not?" bristled Gerald. "You think she fancied you, do you? Coxcomb." He smiled, with a pardonable self-satisfaction. "She never did. Fancied me all along, she says."

"Well, I wish you joy of the married state," said Courtney. Then he groaned and dropped his head into his hands.

"That bad, is it? Well, I am sorry. But you know, perhaps if you were, ah, more attentive, more friendly, in a sort of way..."

"Gerald, she's left me!" cried Courtney.

"Oh. Well, then, I suppose it's too late. I guess she got fed up."

Gerald rolled over out of bed and, staggering slightly, went to pour himself a hair of the dog.

"You take it damned calmly, you bastard," said Courtney. "The wench has eloped to France, with the Comte de Monteuil."

"France? Oh, I see. But it is awkward, isn't it? Bound to be a scandal. Poor old Zo; Alvers won't like it above half."

Courtney looked apoplectic.

"Damn you! Damn you to hell! You are supposed to be my best friend, and when I tell you my wife has left me for another man, all you can say is it will be awkward for *Zoe*? Gerald, I am half out of my mind with grief!"

"You are? Dear boy, I didn't realize. You look pretty bad, of course, but I assumed you had been enjoying yourself rather intensively. I daresay this start of Susan's has shaken you up a bit. Made you realize you love her after all, that sort of thing?"

"I've loved her all along, you halfwit. Well, not all along, perhaps, but for some months. Ever since I began to suspect there was someone else, I suppose. I was furiously jealous. For a while I even thought it might be you, God save us both."

"*Me*?" There was a squeak of alarm in Gerald's lilting tenor. "Never. Never a hint of a thought in that direction. Not a whisper. Not a wisp."

Courtney gave him a searching look.

"You protest very loudly, don't you?"

"I don't," said Gerry. "I do not."

He put on such a spurious expression of unconcern that Courtney had to laugh.

"That's better. A ridiculous notion, Hunter, old boy. Besides, it's Monteuil she's run off with, you say. So now we take up the chase. You plan to shoot him? Fitting, I think. We should be off without delay!"

It was not until they were crossing Westminster Bridge, picking their way among the traffic en route to Newington and the Old Kent Road, that Gerald had recovered his sense of proportion sufficiently to observe, "It seems devilish odd, though, Lady Lee and Monteuil. Of course,

his deathless passion for my lady your sister need not prevent him from having his bit of fun."

"A singularly crass expression, I think," intoned Courtney.

"Well, but you know what I mean. What I mean is, you wouldn't think the fellow would go so far as to run off with her."

"She is carrying his child. Only the veriest blackguard would leave her in the lurch, once the game had got to that stage."

Gerald coughed and spluttered and finally gasped, "The devil you say! How can you possibly know?"

"She's eloped with him, hasn't she?"

"Well, of course, that looks pretty bad, but even if they are lovers, how can you be sure the child isn't your own?"

Courtney directed at his hapless cousin a killing look.

"Oh. You mean... you weren't...?"

"No," said Courtney, flatly, and with a very bad grace.

At that point, a large dray cart chanced to be rumbling past, and Gerry's comment of "Small wonder, then," was fortunately drowned in the din. Or was at least near enough drowned that Courtney was spared the necessity of requiring him to explain just what he meant by that remark, and a rather nasty exchange was thereby happily avoided.

The dray cart passed, and Courtney put spurs to his horse. Gerald followed suit, and Gustaf, their sole attendant, came along close behind, an impressive figure on the biggest horse in Courtney's stable, the only one that could bear the valet's bulk. The three horsemen made good time south and east through Kent, riding hard. Though the road passed within a few miles of Queen's Crown, they were unwilling to turn aside. They spent the night at a coaching-inn not far from the coast, and were at Dover in time for breakfast. While the gentlemen partook of bread and cheese and boiled beef, Gustaf made discreet inquiries in the harbor. The logical extension of Mr. Wimpole's information was confirmed. The *Belle Hèlène*, M. de Monteuil's trim yacht, had set sail three days

previously for France, carrying a lady passenger—a slim, dark, pretty lady passenger—and her maid.

This information was confirmed at the other end of the crossing. The Boulogne grapevine recorded the docking of the *Belle Hèlène*, the disembarkation of the Count and his passengers—and there the trail ended. No one seemed to know whether the Count had stopped the night in Boulogne, or where he would have been likely to lodge if he had. No one could hazard a guess as to whether he would have proceeded to his estates some miles to the south, or whether he had plans to make for Paris, or go off in some other direction entirely. The three men from England spent the late afternoon hours in fruitlessly combing the town's better class of hostelry for any information whatsoever relating to the Comte de Monteuil.

"Damn the rogue!" raged Courtney, stamping around the parlor he had hired for the evening. "He must be traveling incognito. To put us off the scent, no doubt. Hell. If we press on to Paris, and he is not there, we shall be obliged to retrace our steps. But if we stop here, we are like to expend a great deal of effort in making very little progress."

"It is very possible, my lord," put in Gustaf soothingly, "that Monsieur le Comte did not stop in Boulogne at all, but drove straightaway to his chateau upon disembarking. It is only a matter of fifteen or twenty miles along the main road."

"True enough," put in Gerald. "Let's not fret over contingencies till we've tried all the obvious things."

"Very well," said Courtney. "We shall set out for Paris in the morning, stopping off at the damned fellow's chateau on the way. Gustaf, you'll have our horses ready by half-past six."

"Yes, my lord."

Courtney extracted a slim cheroot from his silver-gilt case, and lit it. He eyed his valet curiously over the glowing red tip of the cigar.

"Gustaf, do you ever have an urge to say, 'Go to hell, my lord; do it yourself'?"

The tall Swede's rare smile danced across his square face.

"Yes, my lord," he replied docilely.

Courtney burst out laughing.

"Damme, but I feel better to be doing something! Wearing out the seat of my breeches waiting for Wimpole very near to drove me mad."

He offered Gerald a cigar, and then Gustaf. Both accepted. Gerald poured a glass of wine all round. There was a comfortable atmosphere in the room, very male, a smell of horses and spirits and smoke and sweat. Conversation flagged as the level in the bottle sank, and by the time it reached bottom all three men were slumped soporifically in their chairs, aching muscles relaxed, anxieties at least temporarily put to rest. Near midnight, the valet roused himself and prodded the gentlemen to their rooms, where he pulled off their boots and then let them sleep where they lay. Gustaf himself fell gratefully into bed immediately thereafter, but was up again at half-past five. Fresh horses were waiting and the party ready to ride by half-past six, precisely as planned.

It took three hours of steady riding to reach the Count's chateau. When they arrived, after taking one wrong turning and asking twice for directions, the travelers found the heavy iron gates closed and locked. Only a persistent clanging of the bell and progressively angrier shouts roused the gatekeeper, who grumbled out to say that, No, Monsieur le Comte was not there; No, Monsieur le Comte had not been there in months; No, Monsieur le Comte had not sent any messages or guests; No, Monsieur le Comte was not expected in the foreseeable future; and No, Monsieur le Comte's present whereabouts were not known at the chateau. He also said that Yes, he was quite sure Monsieur le Comte had sent no messages, nor had he brought any guests, and Yes, he did have a healthy respect for the law and his social superiors. He illustrated this last by spitting after the visitors and shouting that he wasn't to be intimidated by any stinking English.

"He thinks he's safe behind that grill," observed

Courtney, "but I have my pistols. Shall I shoot him?"

"I think," commented Gerald pacifically, "he is not entirely in his right mind."

"You are probably right," said Courtney, and they rode on.

On the second day of the journey to Paris, it began to rain heavily. The riders slogged forward, well bundled up against the freezing wet, and made little conversation. When they were too sodden and too cold to manage another mile, they reined in at an uninspiring little auberge where the wine was raw and the dinner was burnt. Courtney exhibited rare forbearance at these minor mishaps, but when he discovered bedbugs in his mattress, he let out a roar which shook the little building to its inadequate foundations, and brought the alarmed landlord running. After an altercation which aroused the entire household, the landlord agreed, for a supplementary fee, to relinquish his own bed to the intemperate *milor'* and Courtney, still bellowing imprecations, dragged both Gerald and Gustaf with him to share the one clean mattress. The next day was little better, and Gerald began to consider strangling Monteuil himself as soon as they should meet up with him.

It began to seem that they never would meet up with him. When they arrived in Paris, the steward at the Count's Paris hotel said the Count was at Versailles. The steward at Versailles said he had left for Fontainebleau. The steward at Fontainebleau said he had returned the day before to Paris.

"He's leading us a dance, Ger," said Courtney. "How can he know we are on his trail so soon? If he's quit Paris again I shall probably have a stroke, but we're bound to catch up to him sooner or later. I'll follow him to Byzantium if he likes."

This time when they arrived at Paris they made no formal inquiries at the Count's town house, but found comfortable lodgings in one of the most elegant of the public hotels. Courtney took pains to discover what private entertainments were being held that evening, and, by scribbling off a hasty but ingratiating note to one of his

mother's acquaintances, he procured cards of invitation to a ball at which all the most fashionable of the fashionables were sure to be found.

"If the bastard is not there, we may be sure he is not in Paris. And if he is, we shall catch him unawares."

Courtney did not mention, though he thought of it, the possibility that Susan might also be at the party.

Since it was to be a very large and very elaborate affair, the two young men got themselves up in the very best Parisian style, complete with powder, face-paint, patches, exotically clocked stockings, and high brightly-colored heels to their narrow silk shoes.

"Damme, Rayne would cut me dead!" laughed Courtney, surveying his reflection in the glass.

"*Mais mon vieux, vous êtes ravissant*! I adore your enameled buttons, and your rose lace handkerchief is simply divine!" effused Gerald, and they both went out laughing.

The party proved to be quite as lavish as expected. The entryway to the stately private house was so crowded with carriages, cursing drivers and jittery horses, that Courtney and his cousin alighted from their cab near the gates and made their way to the front door on foot, sauntering as casually as their impractical footwear would allow, looking celestially unconscious of the chaos that reigned in the road.

The hostess, a regal and gigantically bewigged figure, greeted them with what she considered to be gushing enthusiasm.

"Delightful, my dear Hunter," she warbled, into one of Courtney's ears as she almost touched a floury cheek to his. "And how is Madame your mother? Such a lovely woman."

"Begad," he whispered to Gerry, as they passed on, "the way that woman goes on about my mother, I'm sure she was Rayne's mistress at one time."

Gerald, behind his white and beautifully manicured hand, pulled a face.

The Englishmen circulated easily in the crowded reception hall, parted briefly to make a thorough check

round for Monteuil, and met again to confirm that he had not yet arrived but was expected. Then they parted again. Gerald made for the ballroom, and Courtney for the card tables, where he passed a reasonably agreeable half hour, first winning then losing some tens of louis, until the steward's voice came floating faintly in on a burst of tipsy laughter and sweaty perfume.

Courtney felt his heart leap at the Count's name. Whether it was apprehension or anticipation that stirred him, he could not have said. But some cooler part of him calculated the odds and dispassionately made his bet at rouge-et-noir. He lost, but in total he had come out ahead, so in a moment he rose, collected his modest winnings, and went about his business.

As he stood, there came a rasping shout from another part of the room.

"No, it is not possible! But yes, it is the Hunter! Name of a name, from where have you sprung, my English cabbage?"

The words came in static bursts from the mouth of a small, dark man who bore a strong resemblance to a Capuchin monkey. He bounded across the room and flung his arms about Lord Courtney.

"Begad, you are disguised as a Frenchman, my boy, but there is no mistaking that Britannic air of insouciance. An Englishman at fifty paces, my dear Hunter—you must resign yourself. But how do you come to be in Paris without calling on me? I am injured, I am wounded, I am cut to the heart!"

"Good evening, Marie-Yves," said Courtney tranquilly. "If you will be silent two minutes, I will tell you all about it."

He took the little Frenchman's arm and together they sauntered from the room.

"Silent?" said Yves. "An impossibility, my dear, a physiological impossibility. But tell me, tell me first of all, what is this mad rumor I have heard. They say you are married. But I say, thunder of thunders, it cannot be!"

"Rumor," said Courtney, smiling, "is that most

treacherous of all liars: one that does not scruple occasionally to tell the truth."

"It is true, then?" Yves put a hand to his breast in a tragical gesture. "The companions of my youth are dropping like flies. But you, I had thought to be made of stronger stuff. Well, where is she, your Huntress? Immediately, immediately, I must make the acquaintance of this remarkable lady. Is it true, as they say, that she came with little to recommend her but a lively nature and a face like one of Raphael's madonnas?"

Courtney's eyebrows lifted. "Is that what they say? Extraordinary. I have often thought, myself, that she has the face of the Sistine Madonna in the Palace at Dresden. But I am afraid you will not see it, Yves, because my lady is not, to my knowledge, here just at present."

"I am desolated," said Yves. "But I felicitate you. Raphael has always been one of my favorites."

Courtney looked slightly annoyed, but suppressed it.

"And may I felicitate you, on your new dignities?"

Yves struck his forehead with the ball of his hand.

"Finally, *finally* the old bastard . . . Poor Uncle. He had such a difficult time," he finished piously.

Courtney laughed.

Yves lowered his voice. "That old goat! He did not even know how to die with finesse. I was summoned to his bedside fully half a dozen times for the end before it came. But it did come at last. And what he has left me—you can't imagine, you Englishman. My villages are falling to pieces, the villagers are starving and freezing and grumbling everywhere (why not? I am grumbling myself) and always taxes, taxes, and more taxes. Who is to pay these interminable taxes? My starving, freezing villagers? Myself? I am out of pocket thousands. I am reduced to making investments in trade and vying to obtain the position of Warden of the Royal Chamber Pot or Keeper of the King's Fingernail Parings. There is no one to pay these taxes, there is no way to pay those taxes, and yet they have called the Estates General to vote new taxes. The harvest has been abominable, you know, and the

astronomers say it bids fair to be a hideously cold winter. But no one listens to the scientists. Everyone is ecstatic over the reappointment of Necker. But what did Necker do for us before? Not much. And has he a plan now? None, no more than poor stupid de Brienne and that posturing hypocrite Calonne before him. The fiscal state of this country is appalling; what is desperately needed is a Minister of Finance with some down-to-earth competence, and what we get is Necker, who knows no more than to court public opinion with pretty gestures, advocating breadlines, promising personal loans. Reducing his own salary. Everybody loves him. But next year?" Yves shrugged and drew in the corner of his mouth. "I talk too much. Tell me about yourself, Hunter. Tell me more about this new wife of yours."

Courtney leaned against the wall, in the small niche where they were standing.

"What about the constitution, Yves? Everyone is talking about the establishment of a constitution. They seem to think the king will consent to it."

"Consent? Only if he has no other choice. But I don't care for a constitution; we have done well enough in the past without a constitution. What we need, what we *must* have, is centralization, equalization. We live in the Middle Ages in the provinces, and the modern world in Paris. Commercially speaking (forgive me), it is a disaster. Each petty geographical unit has its own frontiers, and tariffs, its own system of weights and measures, its own system of education (if any), its own laws in many areas. *And* the taxes, which are not only crippling but confusing and breed resentment by the number and distribution of exemptions. Me, for example, I pay taxes on the land; my neighbor's land is assessed by means of a head tax, which is paid by each man, not by the landowner at all. Naturally, those who pay the head-tax hate the landowner, and they envy my people, who don't pay the head-tax; and I hate my neighbor, who doesn't pay the land tax, and my people envy my neighbor's people, whose landowner can afford to do more for them than I can. Which of course means that there are some of

my people who also hate me, because they suspect I could do more for them if I would. And we all, because we are ignorant, feel certain that whatever our status is, it is undoubtedly worse than the next man's."

"Yves," said Courtney, "I am speechless."

"And I," said Yves, "am very dry. We must go in search of a glass of wine."

As they strolled down the marbled hall between one grand brocaded salon and another, Courtney noticed that a small emerald was missing from the buckle of his friend's shoe, and, though his coat was cut in the latest style, it was made from the stuff of an old one, discarded five years ago as passé. It was not all rhetoric, then. Yves, who had lived lavishly on his expectations, now that they were realized, was poor. And if the Vicomte de Trollier-Frivalt was poor, then others, probably many others, were poor. And if the nobility were poor, thought Courtney, God help the peasants.

"Tell me, is the Comte de Monteuil a land-tax man or head-tax man?" he said, whimsically.

Yves looked surprised. "De Monteuil? He is from Picardy, is he not? I can't say I know what sort of taxes he pays."

"Well, it would give me pleasure to do away with one of those neighbors you dislike, my dear."

"Oh?" said Yves, in a significant way.

"But, however that may be, have I leave to make free with your name in a little matter of business I have with the gentleman?"

"Devil take you for a rogue!" cried Yves. "Here we have been talking of trivialities this half hour, of finances like bourgeois merchants, when you have a serious business on hand! I am mortified! But of course you may make use of my name, my dear Hunter. Is the matter arranged?"

"Not quite. But I intend to arrange it, as soon as I can make my way over to the gentleman in green there, whom I think you recognize."

"But of course. Go, my brave one. I shall seek out our friend Gérald, and perhaps Le Corbeau? It will be like old

times! We meet in one hour, by that potted palm there."

"One hour," agreed Courtney.

As he made his way across the room to where the Comte de Monteuil was engaged in conversation with a rather ugly middle-aged woman, he thought about the old times, the half-year he had spent in Paris, as Rayne said, to round out his education. He remembered the endless round of parties, the numerous affairs and intrigues, the wonderful wines, the fabulous food, the clothes and jewels that cost thousands. He remembered the brilliant salons, where conversation had attained the status of a fine art. Was it really different now, or was it Yves's tirade that had changed it for him? Was the music really a bit hollow, the champagne a little faded, the beautifully crafted phrases insignificant? Or maybe, Courtney reflected wanly, he was just five years older. He smiled at a pretty woman, exchanged greetings with a distinguished looking man with a club foot, and found himself at the side of the Comte de Monteuil.

"Good evening, my lord Count. I was hoping to find you here."

Monteuil, addressed from behind, looked round with a tolerably convincing expression of cordial surprise.

"Lord Courtney. I thought I had heard you were in Paris. I hope you are enjoying your visit."

"I have not come on holiday, Monsieur, but I do expect to enjoy my visit. Might I have a private word with you?"

Monteuil bowed politely, feigning mild bewilderment. The two of them made their way to a little balcony, kept warm despite the weather by the flow of close perfumed air from the ballroom. The Count glanced about him.

"Is this private enough?" he asked ironically. "Or would you prefer the library? There must be a library."

Courtney ignored this. He spoke in English.

"I'm sure you realize it is about my wife that I wish to speak."

"Oh, that." Monteuil made a deprecating gesture. "Think nothing of it; I was glad to be of service. I trust you received her letter?"

"Letter?" echoed Courtney, thrown off balance. "I received no letter."

"Perhaps you left London before it could reach you," suggested the Count. "It was posted from Boulogne a few days ago."

"A few days? Well, yes, I was probably gone before a letter could have got to London." Courtney felt singularly deflated. "You would not mind telling me where she is, then?"

The other man smiled urbanely.

"Where she is? My dear Courtney, how should I know? She requested passage to Boulogne, and I took her on the *Belle Hélène*. When we docked, I took her to a suitable hostelry, and came on to Paris."

"You did not stay there with her?"

Monteuil raised his eyebrows. "Pray make your inferences plain, sir."

"What was the name of this hostelry?" demanded Courtney.

"*L'Alouette*, I think. A smallish place not far from the main square. I have stayed there upon occasion myself. It is not elaborate, but I am confident Lady Lakewood was quite comfortable."

Courtney frowned. He did not remember the inn, but he had no doubt it existed. And anyway, they had been enquiring after a man and a woman, not a lady alone with her maid. No wonder their inquiries had been fruitless.

"Where did you go?"

"I think," said Monteuil coldly, "that from the moment I separated from your charming but importunate wife, my movements cease to be your concern, my lord Courtney."

"Tell me, then, why did you do all this for my charming but importunate wife? You must have known I would take exception to your sailing off into the sunset with her, no matter what your motive."

"It was not sunset," replied the Count, "but full morning. You seem determined to view this trivial escapade in the light of an elopement, but I assure you, it was no such thing. The young Countess came to me in a state of great agitation; it was imperative, she said, that

she get to France as soon as humanly possible. She knew, because I had, I think, previously mentioned the fact in conversation, that I was going to France within the next few days. She pleaded with me to take her as a passenger. I refused. She vowed to entrust herself to the Dover mail and the commercial packet-boat. I ask you, my lord, what, as a gentleman, could I do?"

"As a gentleman," said Courtney, "you could have sent for me."

"As a gentleman? When the lady had put her faith in me?"

"Oh, hell," said Courtney. "I'm tired of this. Monteuil, you knew damned well your action would constitute an intolerable affront to me. Do you accept my challenge, or shall I provide you with some provocation? I might, for instance, push you back into the ballroom and knock you down."

Monteuil made a fastidious little grimace.

"I don't think that will be necessary, Hunter. The quarry will stand at bay."

For a second, Courtney remembered that this man had been a friend of his, not an intimate friend, but certainly a friend. Then he forgot it. He nodded.

"My cousin Huntingdale and M. de Trollier-Frivalt will call on you."

"M. de Resnes will act for me."

"On M. de Resnes, then. Tomorrow morning?"

"Between ten and eleven, shall we say."

Courtney bowed. "That will be quite satisfactory. Good night, Monsieur."

"Good night, Monsieur," said Monteuil. "*Et au diable, mon brave impétueux*," he added, under his breath, as Courtney threaded his way back through the crowded hall.

Courtney then spent an unspeakably boring half-hour in the company of two ladies and a tall thin gentleman whose conversation consisted entirely of reflections upon the unspeakable boredom of such entertainments as the one they were attending. Courtney put up with them because the tall thin man appeared to have a monopoly on

some supply of champagne much superior to the stuff in general circulation, and because he had succeeded in commandeering a comfortable chair. At the end of the half-hour, he abandoned his chair, and ambled over to meet Yves.

"I very much admire your shoes," commented the Vicomte, coming up disconcertingly from behind. "You must have bought them just recently."

"This afternoon," admitted Courtney. "They look impressive, I know, but they are surely deforming my toes for life."

"But of course. That elegant point is perhaps the most demonic torture yet devised by the despots of fashion. But one must make some sacrifices to uphold one's integrity, must one not?"

Courtney laughed, and the two of them made their way towards a secondary exit, where they found Gerald with an aptly nicknamed comrade, Le Corbeau, whose bright black eyes sparkled as he greeted Courtney.

"Successful interview with our friend?" asked Gerry softly, falling into step beside his cousin as they walked down the steps to a waiting carriage.

"Successful. You and Marie-Yves are to call on de Resnes in the morning. You'll agree to anything he says."

"Now, just a minute, Lee. I'll agree within reason, but not to anything that disadvantages you *out* of reason. He's a devilish good swordsman, I think. There's nothing we can do about that, of course—it's his choice of weapons—but I shall insist on proper forms. Is there any chance of stopping it at first blood?"

"Maybe. I'll have to think it over. If he spoke truth... Well, I don't know, Ger. I'll tell you what he said, later."

"See, conspirators," interrupted Yves, "we must find something out of the ordinary to do tonight. Our married man is a bachelor again, it seems. What shall we do with him?"

"Oh, God," said Gerry, "if Yves is talking about 'out of the ordinary'..."

"Remember?" put in Le Corbeau. "The fountain?"

Courtney chuckled. "Not one of us saw through Yves's 'impromptu' exhortations that we should have a bathe!"

"And Grumont, poor devil! Remember how he shrieked when the 'statue' whose foot he was sitting on wiggled its toes!"

They all roared with laughter.

"At first he thought it was a goldfish, then he looked up and the statue winked at him. God, I thought he was going to faint!"

"I can't say it didn't give me a turn," admitted Gerald. "In the moonlight, and all."

"Ah, they were good girls," sighed Yves. "Though one of them insisted the white paint had ruined her complexion, and the damned pump to the fountain got clogged in the frolic."

"But it *was* 'out of the ordinary,'" observed Courtney.

"One of my best," Yves agreed. "But I had ample time in which to prepare. Tonight, I'm afraid, we shall have to make do with what the public has to offer."

"Say, what about the *Devochki*?" spoke up Le Corbeau.

"Precisely my thought," said Yves.

"The what?"

"*Devochki*. It means girls, in Russian. And, with unfaultable logic, they are Russian girls. Big blonde girls with legs to here—" He indicated a point somewhere in the middle of his chest. "They speak only Russian."

"*Nyet*," said Gerald.

"*That* word, they don't know," laughed Le Corbeau.

"Say," Gerald put in, "have you heard that the Empress Catherine—"

"Everybody has heard everything that could possibly be said about the Empress Catherine," said Courtney. "Let's *go*!"

They all laughed, and piled into the waiting carriage. As it drove off, Gerald's voice could be heard to ask, "Do you suppose these girls would know if it's true? About the Empress Catherine, I mean?"

# *XVI*

Next morning Lord Courtney spent alone in his hotel room, nursing a mild headache and reading a newspaper. At one point he withdrew from his pocket a white envelope, reread the letter inside, then sealed the envelope and addressed it, "Lady Lakewood." He then put it back into his pocket, and took up his newspaper again. Gerald and Yves strolled in shortly before noon.

"That's a damned unmannerly fellow, that de Resnes," commented Gerald. "Kept us waiting nearly half an hour."

Courtney folded his newspaper, but made no reply.

"But we have settled the business," said Yves. He sat down with one leg draped over the arm of the chair. "And what do you think he has named as weapons?"

"Epée," said Courtney.

"Wrong."

"Rapier?"

"Pistols."

"But I am a crack shot," said Courtney.

"Maybe he is too," observed Gerald.

"But what good'll it do him if I shoot him at the same time he shoots me? He could probably outfence me without so much as getting pinked!"

"Well," said Yves, "that is what he chose—pistols. His."

"I examined 'em," Gerald said. "A bit long, but decently weighted. You'll have a trial shot, of course."

"Three o'clock this afternoon, behind the Madrid in the Bois. Twenty paces," said Yves.

"Twenty?" Courtney nodded. "Not bad. Now, I think,

I shall go for a walk. I'll meet you gentlemen back here at two."

As he left the hotel, Courtney did not give the appearance of a man who was likely to die in a couple of hours. He trotted down the steps rather briskly, and set off towards the Seine. Once he got to the bank, he strolled for twenty minutes down the boulevard, then strolled for twenty minutes back up. On the way, he passed several acquaintances, to whom he lifted his hat but did not speak. He thought of the dog Brandy, and rather wished he were with him. Then he made his way leisurely back to the hotel.

Yves and Gerald were waiting in his room, Gerald pacing nervously and looking repeatedly out of a window.

"Here he is," said Yves, as Courtney walked in.

Gerry left the window.

"We have hired a coach," said Yves. "But the coachman is my own. He is entirely trustworthy, my dear Hunter. And on our way we shall take up my surgeon, also a reliable and discreet man."

"Thank you," said Courtney, a little drily. "You think of everything."

Yves shrugged, and the three of them left the room together, in silence. In the coach, there was conversation only of the most desultory sort. When the surgeon got in, no introductions were made. In case of an official inquiry, the less he knew, the better.

When the unmarked French carriage pulled up under the trees behind the chateau de Madrid, its occupants saw that the Comte de Monteuil had already arrived at the place of meeting. His equipage stood empty, while the seconds fidgeted with their paraphernalia. The Count himself could be heard walking among the fallen leaves, out of sight.

Before Courtney's party alighted, Yves turned and said, "You must know by now, Hunter. Will you be killed?"

Courtney smiled. "No," he said.

He was right. When the shots had been fired, both men were left standing on the field, with wisps of smoke

floating upwards from their pistols in the wan winter sunlight. The Count blew delicately across the barrel of his, and then, with a small bow in Courtney's direction, he walked away. Courtney didn't move.

"Damme," muttered Gerald, coming up. "Not a scratch! What the hell happened?"

"The pistol was gimmicked," said Courtney, between his teeth.

"Oh, come now," said Gerald. "It couldn't have been. You loaded it yourself, after the trial shot."

"There must be a trick to compensate, that I didn't know. Swine! And I took him for a gentleman!"

Yves appeared.

"The surgeon is leaving. But what is the matter? Hunter, you look like the devil himself. So you missed him!"

In a clear, distant tone, Courtney said evenly, "Don't let that surgeon go." Then he wavered, and collapsed.

"Holy Mother of God!" cried Yves. "He is hit!"

As they eased Courtney to the ground, de Resnes came up to reclaim the Count's pistol. Courtney handed it to him without a word, but with a look of utter contempt. De Resnes, mystified, put it down to disappointment, and went away.

The surgeon arrived, with Gerald, at a sprint. Together they hauled Courtney into the closed carriage and made their way out of the area before anyone who might have heard the shots could arrive on the scene. They drove to another corner of the Bois, where they could reasonably expect to have a few minutes undisturbed, and the surgeon set to work. He found the wound in the outside on the thigh, just below the hip, and made a quick probe for the ball. Courtney made a strangled sound of pain, and passed out. After some further search, the ball was found to be lodged close to the bone. As it was drawn out, with a long pair of pincers, blood began to gush from the opening. Gerald, turning green, averted his face. When Courtney came to, very much wishing he hadn't, Yves set Gerald to dosing him with spirits from a flask, while the two Frenchmen worked rapidly to staunch the blood and

bind the wound tightly with bandages. Soon, Courtney was presentable enough to travel.

The return to the hotel caused some sensation, but since it was undeniably true that *milor'* was both intoxicated and injured in the leg, no one thought to wonder which had happened first. The judicious addition of a large bandage around the ankle lent plausibility to a story of a fall, and if there were some who thought the story rather too pat, it was at least good enough to pass.

The first night, Courtney lay passively in bed, too dazed to comment upon his situation. But in the morning, to the discomfiture of all concerned, he began to come to himself. He started in immediately to demand that he be taken home to England. In vain did the doctor emphasize the inadvisability of undertaking a long journey in uncertain weather. Courtney was adamant. He wanted to go home; he *would* go home, and be damned to them all. At the end of three days, the exasperated doctor had begun to think he would be happy to see the last of his difficult patient. He told Marie-Yves that even the rigors of travel could not be any more harmful to Lord Courtney's health than his constant fretting and quarreling.

When he heard he would be allowed to go home, Courtney became instantly the most tractable of patients. He ate whatever he was offered, swallowed whatever evil medical potions were given to him, and was the soul of courtesy to his entourage. Everybody breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief.

In the next day or two, they started off for Boulogne in as luxurious a hired chaise as could be found in Paris. The doctor went home to his rooms in the Rue du Bac, but Yves came along. Courtney was duly grateful, and made a very pretty speech. He seemed to be recovering rapidly. But by the time the chaise had passed the first few stages, he was flushed and tossed restlessly in the makeshift bed that stretched between the two seats in the carriage. He drank a potion provided by Gustaf, who sat beside him, but flew into a rage when Gerald tried to insist upon a stopover at the next posting-house. Gerald gave as good

as he got, swearing and shouting through the carriage window from his horse, but was defeated when Courtney fastened the window shut and turned his face away.

They proceeded at a restricted pace for the rest of the day, and halted at about five o'clock, shortly after dark. They spent the night at a wayside inn, where Courtney's restless thrashings and moanings in a drugged sleep kept his valet awake till dawn. He awoke shortly thereafter, and insisted upon setting out again immediately. This time even Gustaf objected, but his lordship again won out, by dint of furious argument, threats, and insults.

"Good God, he's a lunatic!" cried Gerald, to Yves, as they rode along, cold and miserable, beside the chaise. "Does he *want* to kill himself?"

"Perhaps," said Yves. "Perhaps he just wants to get home."

At this point, Gustaf put his head out of the chaise, and halted the cavalcade.

"His lordship is delirious," he told Gerald. "We must find some way of breaking the fever."

"Well, hell!" cried Gerry. "Why could you not have said so at the last change of horses? We are in the middle of bloody nowhere!"

He looked round at the bleak and empty countryside, in the grip of a remorseless winter. There was no habitation to be seen, not even a thread of smoke on the horizon. The only sign of life came from a free-running stream by the side of the road that leaped and danced in the pallid sunlight, too swift to be caught in the general freeze.

"The brook, I think, must serve as an ice-bath," said Gustaf.

Yves started. "You intend to immerse my friend Hunter? It is madness!"

Imperturbable, Gustaf discoursed for several minutes on the efficacy of the ice-bath as a means of reducing fever. At length, dubious but resigned, Yves and Gerald dismounted and helped to carry the wounded man down to the water. The coachman and two postilions looked on, aghast. Gustaf, unconcerned, stripped his master to his

shirt and cloth breeches, and then, carrying him like a baby, lowered him into the water, soaking his clothes thoroughly but keeping his head dry. Courtney stirred and shivered, then mumbled something. He swung his head from side to side. Then his eyes flickered open. He stiffened, and lay for a moment transfixed, then he let out a blood-curdling scream and began thrashing about wildly.

"Watch that leg!" yelled Gustaf.

Gerald splashed into the stream, captured the wounded leg, and held it tightly.

"My lord," murmured Gustaf, stroking his head soothingly, "my lord, it's Gustaf. You are quite safe, sir. Quite safe. It's Gustaf."

After a few moments, which seemed very long, Courtney seemed to hear. He looked up at the square Swedish face, then reached up to touch it.

"Whalley... has he gone? He's nearly killed me, Gustaf. God... God, I..."

"That was long ago, my lord," said Gustaf. "You have been ill of a fever. You are in France, my lord."

"*France*?"

He looked vague and confused, but submitted to being returned to the chaise, and put into his nightshirt, and wrapped in several rugs. He was docile as the carriage started off again, but continued to look troubled.

"Monteuil. Yes, I remember now. But it was the damnedest thing, Gustaf." He shuddered, not from the cold. "When I woke up to find myself in that stream, I thought... Well, you know what I thought."

"Yes, my lord. I am sorry for the unhappy association."

Courtney adjusted the rug about his shoulders. He seemed to need to talk, and touch things to make sure they were real.

"But I had been dreaming. I kept dreaming about falling over some damned chair. I kept thinking, 'God, if I make a row, it will bring Whalley.' And then I'd think, 'No, it's all right, I'm at home.' But the dream kept coming back. Then I woke up in the water, and I thought, 'My

God, I did rouse Whalley, and he's going to kill me.'" He shuddered again. "Very nasty, when the mind plays tricks on one. It was vivid, too, that persistent little dream. I can even see the chair—a nasty little gilt thing covered in mauve cut-velvet. Spindly. Kept grabbing at my ankles."

Gustaf smiled. "The Louis XIV chair in the upstairs hallway."

Courtney looked thunderstruck. "That's it! That's the very chair! How the hell do you know?"

"If you recall, sir, you had something of a set-to with that chair one night. Something in your delirium must have called it to mind." The valet had difficulty restraining himself from breaking into a chuckle. He had a vivid mental picture of his employer disheveled and undignified, struggling to untangle his feet from the slim legs and struts of the offending chair like a character in a farce.

"I had a set-to with that chair? What sort of set-to? I don't remember anything of the kind," said Courtney, somewhat haughtily.

"Perhaps not, sir. A trivial incident."

"But why did I dream of it? Why don't I remember anything about it?"

"If you'll forgive my saying so, my lord, you were perhaps a little the worse for a bottle of burgundy."

"A little? I must have been devilish done in not to remember nearly breaking my neck. I take it you put me to bed?"

"No, sir, as a matter of fact, I did not. You were returning from her ladyship's room, and you seemed to be at pains to avoid rousing the household, so I thought it best to let you be, once you had escaped from the chair." Here Gustaf could not repress a quick grin, but when he saw the look on his employer's face, it faded abruptly.

"When was this?" demanded Courtney, in a strange, rough voice. "Do you remember when?"

"As it happens, my lord, I do. It was the night of her ladyship's first dinner party. I remember Mr. Cole remarking that the damage to the gilt chair was the only damage sustained to the furniture."

"Oh, my God," said Courtney. He sank back against the cushions and closed his eyes. "Oh, my God, forgive me, for she never will."

At first the valet thought he must have gone off into another trance brought on by the illness, but his forehead was cool and his eyes, when he opened them again, were clear and normally bright.

"Give me some laudanum," was all he said. "I wish to sleep."

# *XVII*

Courtney slept through most of the rest of the journey, but it was a heavy, unhealthy sleep that seemed to do him little good. He was as silent and passive as he had been edgy and aggressive before, and when it was suggested he abandon his intention of proceeding to London but stop at Queen's Crown, he agreed without demur. Just before the last posting-stage, however, he asked to have Gerald in the carriage, and Gustaf out. His wish was quickly complied with.

"Well, old lad," said Gerald heartily, "we're almost home. And I hope you'll begin to get the proper rest you need."

"I want you to go on up to London for me," said Courtney. "I'd send Gustaf, but I'll need him. Monteuil told me Susan posted a letter for me from Boulogne."

"No wonder you've been in such a devil of a hurry! Why didn't you tell us before? One of us could have ridden ahead."

Courtney felt very weak.

"I wanted to get home. I want Rayne. If I weren't so damned ill..." For the first time since he was a boy, he felt tears in his eyes. It was so mortifying, he managed to pull himself together. "You remember what I told you about Susan's child? Well, I was mistaken."

"Mistaken? That's a hell of a thing to be mistaken about!" cried Gerald.

"Yes, isn't it?" His voice was so tired that Gerry was sorry for his outburst. "But I was mistaken. Tell Bella, will you? She tried to make me see reason, but I'd none of it. Oh, Ger—" Breaking off, he clapped his cousin on the

knee and said, "Just get the hell to Town and back with that letter!"

"It will be in your hands within twenty-four hours!" vowed Gerald.

At the next stage, they found Gerry's last steady hack in the stable, and were told he had set off hell for leather on the fastest posting-horse available nearly an hour before. Courtney smiled. They rested for a long time, took some considerable solid refreshment, and several cups of hearty mulled wine apiece. It was late afternoon by the time they drove up to the clock tower at Queen's Crown, but Courtney was looking better than he had for days. Still, he was unable to walk on his leg, and had to be helped into the house by Gustaf and one of the footmen. He had barely got across the hall when Lord Rayne appeared, unhurried, unruffled.

"Clumsy child," he said, shouldering the footman aside almost unconsciously, "have you fallen off your horse?"

Gustaf felt the wounded man's weight shift heavily, as Lord Rayne took most of it.

"Or has the Revolution begun?"

With this indirect reference to Marie-Yves, Rayne extended his hand to the Frenchman, who took it politely. Like most of Courtney's friends, he found Lord Rayne a little difficult to figure out, and trod warily in his presence.

Within a short time, the three gentlemen and Her Ladyship were ensconced in the Map Room. Rayne handed glasses of madeira all round.

"So," he said, gazing at his son, who lay in the large leather armchair with his foot propped up. "Did you kill him?"

Courtney scowled. "No, I missed."

Lord Rayne raised an eyebrow. "Completely?"

Courtney scowled the harder, but was too proud to mention the fault in the pistol. "He walked off the field like walking out of church."

"Would you like to tell me what it was all about?"

"Yes, yes I would."

"Privately?"

"No. Mama will have to know sooner or later, I suppose, and I don't mind Yves. It... well, the long and short of it was, Susan and I quarreled, and she ran off to France with the Comte de Monteuil. I had to go after 'em."

There was a stifled gasp from Lady Rayne. A look from her husband silenced her, but her eyes darted cold blue flame.

"You went after 'em. Did you find 'em?"

"I found him, but she wasn't with him any more. At least, that's what he said. He said a number of things, and I don't know really how much of it was true... Oh, Lord, I don't know much, Rayne. And my leg is throbbing like bloody hell."

"Ring for his valet, will you, Marie-Yves?" said Rayne. "He's good for nothing tonight. We'll go into it tomorrow, Lee," he added, dragging the long fingers of one hand lightly across his son's white cheek.

Half an hour later, Courtney was resting in his own bed, inexpressibly comforted by the feel of a clean lawn nightgown against his body and the finest linen against his face. He felt as if he would really rest naturally for the first time in days. Before going to sleep, he ordered Gustaf to wake him as soon as Gerald should arrive from London, but Lord Rayne countermanded the order, and Gustaf, exercising his own judgment, decided in this case to obey Lord Rayne. Accordingly, Courtney remained blissfully unconscious for well over twelve hours. It was nearly noon when he opened his eyes to find that the plaguey throbbing in his leg had gone away and he was ravenously hungry. He hauled on the bell-pull.

"You rang, milord? Good morning, milord."

Gerald came in, bowing with satirical obsequiousness. He balanced a tray on one hand, and carried a leather pouch in the other. The tray, he deposited over the recumbent form of his lordship.

"What is it?" asked Courtney, eyeing a bowl of brown liquid dubiously.

"Boiled, scraped beef in broth," said Gerald.

"You can't be serious," said Courtney, and put it aside.

"Now be a good fellow, Lee, and drink the swill. Her La'ship says she'll hold me personally responsible."

"I'll drink it. Just give me the letters first."

Reluctantly, Gerald deposited the leather pouch on the coverlet.

"I think it only fair to warn you, old lad, that unless the Countess has adopted the secret identity of your Courtney bailiff or one of a number of tonnish hostesses, you will not find there what you are looking for."

"The devil!"

Courtney ransacked the pouch, dumped the contents out on the bed, and went through them again. After opening an invitation or two, in the interests of thoroughness, he realized that Gerald was right. There was no letter from Susan.

"I suppose," he said finally, "she changed her mind."

"In my opinion, it was all a hum," Gerald said. "Monteuil used it to try to put you in a more conciliatory frame of mind, or at least to gain time. When it didn't work, there was no particular reason for him to disabuse you."

"Then—But—What—" He cast about for something to crush, or throw, or tear to pieces. There was nothing. "So what the god-damned devil are we to do now?" he finished explosively.

"Drink your beef broth, m'boy, and get well."

Maddeningly, Lord Rayne, when consulted, was of Gerald's opinion that the foremost item on the agenda was the restoration of Courtney's health. That unfortunate young man was subjected to any number of cups of beef broth daily, and to enforced idleness. When he grumbled and chafed, Lord Rayne was not above pointing out that he had made a right royal mess of it to date, and that his best course would be to lie low and let his betters try to straighten it out. But such caustic comments would be accompanied by fleeting caresses that Courtney remembered from his childhood, and he knew his father felt for him, and was doing all he could to find Susan and, almost certainly, to bring her back.

Even Lord Rayne's best, however, seemed to turn up

little in the way of concrete information. Agents were sent to Boulogne, where they succeeded in verifying that a Madame Hunter and her maid had spent a single night at the *Alouette*, as Monteuil had said, and as Courtney had already found to be true. But further than that, there was nothing to be learned in Boulogne. Madame Hunter had left the inn early in the morning, on foot, and it was not known which direction she had taken. No hints or references had been heard by the maids. There had been, thought the chambermaid, some sheets of paper found in the grate with writing on them, but the maid did not read, and had simply added them to the kindling for the next fire. Inquiries in the city itself proved no more fruitful; no one had seen a quietly dressed young woman and a maid on the morning of December 8, walking away from the *Alouette*, or if they had, it was too long ago to remember it. And there seemed to be no clue as to where M. de Monteuil had stayed, if indeed he had stayed in Boulogne during that night. Further investigation, and even infiltration, of the Count's chateau proved unenlightening. And a professional shadow put on the Count himself reported no suspicious movements or mysterious rendezvous. It seemed, as Monteuil had said, that Susan had vanished of her own volition, and that he had nothing further to do with her.

Meantime, Yves returned to France, promising to keep a sharp eye out and to take note of any gossip that might be circulating about the Comte de Monteuil. Gerald posted back and forth from London, visiting his intended and hoping each time that she would have received some communication from the missing Countess. But none came. Zoe returned to Queen's Crown to celebrate Christmas with her family. It was an event marked more by churchgoing and a few carols than by any particular merriment. Lord Stephen also went home and, having been taken into confidence, was so stubbornly adamant about his forthcoming marriage to the Lady Zoe that the Duke very nearly became suspicious that some scandal was about to break.

At Queen's Crown, there seemed nothing to do but

await developments. Courtney had hopes that, even if the first letter had somehow gone astray, since she had written once, Susan might write again. When the thought came, unbidden and unwelcome in the night, that she might be unable to write, he pushed it out of his mind. He refused to believe she might be destitute, or ill, or even dead. But he had nightmares about souls in such poverty they had not a moment to spare from their labors, and austere hospitals full of flushed, feverish, crying young girls, and—worst of all—evil-smelling, brutalized midwives hawking "remedies" for unwanted pregnancy. Courtney continued to have Gustaf sleep within hailing distance despite the rapid healing of his leg wound.

Lord Rayne, outwardly philosophical, kept his agents posted at Boulogne, and kept a tail on M. de Monteuil. It was New Year's Eve when he received a report that the Count had left Paris, heading north. It was only next day that he received a further report, indicating that the Count's destination was apparently Calais, and on the next day following, a courier came to say that the Count had landed at Dover, and appeared to be making for London. Later that afternoon, M. de Monteuil called at Queen's Crown.

"*Here*?" cried Courtney, when Quarles brought him the card. "He's come here? My God, the fellow has a nerve!"

Lord Rayne smiled.

"Perhaps he has come to enquire after your health. Very neighborly."

Courtney blasphemed. "The man's a blackquard and a poltroon," he asserted. He told his father about the curious misfiring of the dueling pistol. "I don't say I mightn't miss a target, but this was something quite different. As I pulled the trigger, the barrel kicked hard, to the left, and the shot went wild. Of course, I had my choice of the pistols, and I had my trial shot, but the guns had already been loaded. I think there was a trick to the loading."

"You think he meant to kill you?"

Courtney shrugged. "I think if he had really wanted to

kill me, he would have chosen blades. More likely, he didn't care what happened to me, only wanted to make dead sure he wasn't put out of commission himself. In a fair fight, there's always an element of luck, and it might have gone against him to some degree."

Lord Rayne looked thoughtful. "Well, I daresay we'll find out now what his game is. I take it you'll see him?"

"Oh, I'll see him." He called Quarles back and told him to send M. de Monteuil upstairs. His injury, he said, prevented him from coming down.

Quarles said, "Very good, my lord," and withdrew, knowing full well that Courtney could have come downstairs if he had wanted to.

Rayne lowered his stockinged feet from a corner of his writing table, and closed his book on his finger to mark his place. As he slipped on his shoes, Courtney came, limping slightly, to take his seat in the large leather chair Rayne was vacating. By the time Quarles showed the Count into the room, Courtney had taken possession of it, and Lord Rayne was nowhere to be seen. The young man looked up, hypocritically polite, slightly bored, faintly condescending, as M. de Monteuil came through the door.

Neither man made a move to shake hands, though the Count did make a civil inquiry about Courtney's health. Courtney made a noncommittal reply.

"Well, then," he went on, "why don't we get to the point? Why have you come here, Monteuil?"

"I have come, my dear sir, because it is time for the next act in the drama." He smiled a brittle little smile. "Are you not enjoying your part so far? The dashing chevalier!"

"You have five minutes, Monteuil," said Courtney, "and then I'll have you thrown out. If you have something to say, say it."

"Very good. Quite in character. But *I* am the director, my dear. I shall say what I have to say in my own good time."

Courtney's face got colder and he looked more bored as his bewilderment increased.

"Ah, you find me tedious, my lord. I promise to rectify

that soon. Tell me, did you not find that all was as I said with your lady at Boulogne?"

"The hotelier at the *Alouette* confirmed that she had spent a night there, yes."

"But as to the matter of her movements thereafter, have you succeeded in uncovering any information?"

"I fail to see," said Courtney, "how that concerns you, sir."

"As a matter of fact," smiled Monteuil, "it concerns me not at all. What concerns me at the moment is the letter that her young ladyship sent to you from Boulogne."

Courtney could not keep a skeptical sneer from twisting his mouth.

"Ah, you doubt the existence of such a letter? Understandable, perhaps. But the letter did exist, I assure you. It was entrusted to me for posting."

Courtney's eyes narrowed. "And did you post it?"

The Count waved a hand in a charming Gallic gesture of apology.

"I cannot conceive how I came to overlook such a modest duty. In fact, one might reasonably be justified in imagining I did not overlook it, but rather—My, you move quite well on that leg already, don't you?"

Courtney had both hands full of the Count's elegant ruffled neckcloth. He said nothing, but the look on his face was eloquent.

"The letter, as I was about to indicate to you, my dear Courtney, is at present in my pocket. If you will permit me, I shall put it now into your hands."

Courtney slowly unclenched his fists, and stepped back. Monteuil deliberately withdrew from his coat a folded piece of paper.

It read:

> my Departure may have caused you some Inconvenience and if so, I am sorry for it. On the whole, I wish I had not run away, but there is no help for it now. I am resolved for the future to take whatever course you think best, so please write and tell me what to do, and I will do it.

Please do not think hardly of me, for you are quite, quite mistaken. I am truly

Your faithful, (and loving) wife,

Susan

"It's not complete," said Courtney. "The top has been torn away."

"Merely a precaution," said the Count.

Courtney's leg began to ache. His gaze returned to Susan's laboriously penned letter. He could not remember having taken much note of her handwriting before, but now it seemed infinitely appealing in its childish meticulousness.

"A precaution?" he echoed.

"The first part of the letter," explained Monteuil, "contains an indication of her present whereabouts, and that is an information I am not ready to put at your disposal."

Courtney tried hard to think, in spite of the renewed throbbing in his leg and a sudden inability of his eyes to focus properly.

"What is it you want, Monteuil? Money?"

The Count dismissed the offensive suggestion with a gesture.

"My dear fellow, you must be joking. But *I* am not joking, let me assure you of that. I have the little Countess, and I mean to keep her. She may try to write you again, but no letter will reach you. She may try to come home of her own accord, but when she does, she will find it is not so easy to depart my realm as it is to enter. Pretty little Suzanne will remain exactly where she is until I choose to let her go."

Courtney, his face calm and quiet, moved back around behind the writing table, and sat down once more in the black leather chair. He opened a drawer and dropped the torn piece of cheap stationery into it.

"You're something of a maniac, you know, Monteuil. This sort of thing—it just isn't done."

Monteuil laughed. "You English! Of course it is done, since I have done it."

Courtney shrugged. "I suppose you have. From the time I fired your cheater's pistol, it was clear you were a villain. Well, then, tell me what it is you want for the Countess."

"What I want for your little kitten of a Countess," the softly accented voice mused. "I want only what should have rightfully been mine all along." The Count smiled. "I want your sister, the incomparable Lady Zoe."

Courtney's self-control went out the window. His mouth dropped open.

"You're insane!"

"It could be." Monteuil's eyes strayed to the portrait above the fireplace, Zoe at eighteen in her first ball gown. "It could be I am mad. But if I am mad or not, I am determined. I will have my lady. It is a fair exchange—one woman for another. You may consider the proposal, my lord, although I cannot say what there is to consider, for if you refuse, you may be sure you will never see your little Countess again. I can be reached at the village inn, the George, I think it is called. Decidedly, you English do not suffer from an excess of originality."

M. de Monteuil got up, bowed gracefully, and let himself out of the room. Courtney stood thunderstruck. Within a moment or two, a concealed panel opened in the wall, and Lord Rayne appeared. He and Courtney stared at each other for some little time, then Rayne swore, long, loud, and with gusto.

At this juncture, the hall door burst open and Gerald, hat in hand, riding boots scattering clots of dried mud, barreled in.

"I just passed Monteuil, not a quarter of a mile down the drive. I'll swear it was him! Has he been here? What the *hell* did he want? That fellow—Oh, I say, Hunter, you look positively green. Sit down, you're not a well man. And Rayne... what *is* going on?"

Lord Rayne sighed. "Monteuil was here. He came to tell us what has happened to Susan."

"Well?" cried Gerald.

"She's been kidnapped," said Courtney.

Staring, Gerry removed his boots and sat down. He

looked back and forth from his uncle to his cousin, and finally hazarded, "It's got to be a joke. Who'd kidnap Susan?"

Lord Rayne offered a concise explanation, which seemed to convince Gerald, then they all fell silent. It sounded both more fantastic and more real, expressed in Rayne's cool, clipped sentences.

"Well?" he asked finally. "Any ideas?"

"Let's blow his brains out," said Courtney. "Then we'll be left with a clear field to look for her."

He found the lovely framed maps on the walls had become depressing. They seemed to emphasize how very many places there were in the world, and how futile a search for one small person in one small corner of it might be.

"My idea," said Lord Rayne, "would be to kidnap Monteuil himself. Once he is in our hands, we can make the simple proposition—his freedom for Susan's."

"Hell!" cried Courtney. "We just this moment let him walk out of here, free as a bird!"

"Well, we'd have had to do that anyway. Even for us, it might be awkward if it was known that the Comte de Monteuil walked into Queen's Crown and never walked out again. We must be subtler than that. Because we must be prepared for the contingency that he will refuse. And then, I'm afraid, we shall be obliged to resort to your idea, Lee."

Gerald, taking a sip of wine, coughed and spluttered.

"Uncle Bernard, you aren't seriously suggesting that we murder the man, in cold blood?"

"Oh, not in cold blood, certainly," replied Rayne, with a flashing smile.

Gerald looked ill.

"He has threatened, you know, to do away with her," put in Courtney. "At least, that's what 'you may be sure you will never see her again' sounds like to me."

"Yes, but... but..." stammered Gerald. "Well, perhaps he will agree to the proposition, once he sees Rayne is sincere."

"We shall hope so," said Lord Rayne.

"You may hope so," said Courtney. "I hope not. It will be such a pleasure to kill him!"

"But why on earth," asked the Lady Zoe, "should I invite M. de Monteuil to a private rendezvous?"

She had come to the council in the Map Room readily enough, but she did not seem willing to go along docilely and ignorantly with the gentlemen's plans.

"You should invite him," said Lord Rayne, "because your dear papa requests it of you."

Zoe laughed.

"We don't ask you to keep the rendezvous," pointed out Courtney, "just set it up."

"This is a serious matter," said Rayne. "And important, I assure you. We need your cooperation."

Zoe raised her eyebrows and folded her hands in her lap.

"If you need my cooperation, then you must explain what this is all about, for you certainly shan't get any cooperation otherwise."

"I have explained," said Lord Rayne. "We want you simply to pen a short note of hand to the Comte, at the George in the village, stating that you wish to meet with him, at a certain time and place. It would be a nice touch, I think, if you mention that you write without my knowledge or approval."

"You are absurd," said Zoe.

"A fine way to talk!" shouted Rayne, jumping to his feet and brandishing a forefinger. "A fine way for a young lady to defy her father! I have instructed you to write, and by God, you shall write!"

Zoe stamped her foot and looked lightning bolts.

"By God, I will not!"

Rayne subsided.

"Damn. Well, it was worth a try to keep you out of this. But here it is, Zo: Monteuil has abducted little Susan, and we want to lure him onto the grounds in the dead of night so we can shoot him."

"*What*?" Zoe cast around the room for the most speaking pair of eyes. "Gerry, is he serious?"

"Never more so, I fear, my love. The fellow's holding the Countess for ransom. Only way we can make him see reason, we think, is by taking hold of him and threatening him, with a pistol-point to his temple."

"My God, you *are* serious!"

Lord Rayne glanced from his daughter's face to the inkstand, and drew a piece of paper out of a stationery box. Zoe sank into a chair.

"Poor child! Where is she?"

"We don't know," said Courtney. "Somewhere in France, we think."

"Dear me. How very... disturbing. Are you quite, quite sure?"

"Yes, he's got her, right enough. It's not a bluff, Zo. We're sure."

"But... Ransom? Is he so poor as that?"

Everyone looked away. Finally Gerry blurted, "He don't want money; he wants you."

Zoe looked uncomprehending for a moment, then paled, and twirled a stand of hair around her forefinger. As she folded her hands again in her lap, she pronounced, "This man is not a gentleman."

"No, my darling," said Lord Rayne. "He is a swine. He deserves to be exterminated."

"You want me to intimate that I have been apprised of the situation, and that I am willing to go with him, to save my sister?"

Lord Rayne nodded.

"And when he comes for me, you will catch him and threaten him, and if he does not yield to pressure, you will shoot him?"

"We feel sure our threats will prove efficacious," said Courtney, who was sure of no such thing. "As you have pointed out, the man is no gentleman."

"We've been over and over it," elaborated Gerald. "We can't see any other way. He's a bit off his head, you know."

"Yes, I quite see that. But surely there is another way..."

"Out of the question," snapped Rayne.

"You aren't going to suggest—" began Gerald.

"—That we comply with his demand," finished Zoe. "Yes, I am suggesting exactly that. It is a matter of life and death it seems, and—"

"Oh, belt up, Zo," said her brother. "There's no point in philosophizing over it. Even if you were free, which you're not, being pledged to Beaumont, we'd never allow you to sacrifice yourself to a madman's whim. Don't be an ass. I mean," he added, "it's very noble and all, and as it's my wife I'm bound to say I appreciate the offer, but you're talking utter rubbish."

"My lord, your condescension overwhelms me," replied Zoe.

Lord Rayne intervened.

"We're all a bit distraught, I think. Zoe, my love, we'd really like to get this thing over as soon as possible."

Zoe rose.

"Gentlemen, I shall consider your request. You will have a reply by tea time," she said, and swept serenely from the room.

Rayne scowled.

"Why couldn't she just sit down and scribble out the thing? Why can't women ever leave bloody bad enough alone?"

But when Zoe came down to tea, she said she had come to the conclusion that she must do as her father asked. She went with him to the Map Room, together they composed a short note, and it was dispatched without further ado. The rendezvous was set for nine that evening, in the summerhouse at the bottom of the Lower Garden.

No reply to the letter was expected, and none came. Zoe spent a restless afternoon puttering about the house, finally collaring her brother to ride with her about the park. By the time dinner was served at half-past six, everyone's temper was short. Lord Rayne and Gerald had spent the afternoon at fencing, and both ate well, but Courtney was irritable, and barely picked at his food. Lady Rayne, realizing that something was afoot, and also realizing that she had no chance of worming any

information out of her preoccupied dinner companions, bottled up her frustrations and, after commenting once acidly on Gerald's table manners, stared stonily into space until the removal of the brandied peaches. Then she got up and left the room.

Zoe followed close behind. She said she was feeling headachy, and would retire.

"I don't want to hear any more about your plots," she told her father. "I want to be left alone tonight."

Rayne took her hands and kissed them.

"You must not reproach yourself, my love. You have acted all for the best."

Zoe bit her lip, and nodded, and then she went upstairs with her neat black head held high, as always.

The footmen had withdrawn, leaving decanters of various wines and two sorts of brandy. No one drank. Lord Rayne slumped over the table, his hands outspread on the white damask cloth.

"Claire did not look as if she would be very receptive to any amorous attentions, did she?"

In spite of himself, Courtney laughed. "It has exactly the same effect on me."

"It just makes me hungry," said Gerald. "I wish they had not taken away the chocolate creams."

There was a hollow ping from the clock on the sideboard.

"Quarter past," interpreted Gerry.

"Well, shall we?" Courtney pushed back his chair and stood up.

The three of them made their way to the Armaments Room, an out-of-the-way section of the Square Corridor where a suit of armor dating back to the reign of Henry VIII stood sentinel. As children, Courtney and Gerald had delighted in terrifying the servants by devising ways to make the metal arms clank or produce a hollow sound inside the suit, until Lord Rayne had given them their own back by putting it on and phantasmagorically interrupting a midnight foray into the kitchen. Since then, the iron suit had been known as the Hair-Raiser, or Harry, for

short, and held a significant place in the affections of all concerned. Tonight, however, Harry was passed by in silence.

The three men, stern, but in the grip of a steadily increasing excitement, took up their pistols, newly cleaned and loaded. Gerald turned his over and over in his hand. Finally Courtney took it away from him.

"You've no need of a gun," he said. "You won't be called upon to shoot. It's not your quarrel."

Gerald, considerably relieved, collected the three dark cloaks from the table. Suitably muffled against the cold and against premature detection by their quarry, they slipped out into the night.

By eight forty-five they were stationed about the summer house, a Palladian style folly, domed and many-windowed. There were only two rooms, with a vestibule between. In the vestibule, Lord Rayne kindled a small flickering light before taking up his stand behind the door. Courtney waited outside, in a clump of rhododendron, with a clear view of the entrance. Gerald was posted a short way down the path behind a tree, with orders to hoot like an owl as soon as Monteuil passed by.

"Mind you don't hoot too loud," Courtney warned his cousin. "No real owl perches five feet off the ground beside a footpath. You must seem distant."

Gerald hooted satisfactorily, and then they separated. They all settled down to wait.

It was cold, extremely cold. Courtney sniffed the air and decided that it would probably snow in the next day or two. He wondered hard what the next day or two would bring besides snow, and he felt a great welling up of hatred for the man who had dared to steal his wife and his unborn child. He had strong, protective feelings now, toward them both, but when he thought of Susan, his heart was heavy. It did not seem possible that she should love him still, after all he had done to make her detest him, but he wished with all his heart he might have the chance to try and make it up to her.

Through the night air floated the distant call of an owl. For a pensive moment the sound did not register, then

Courtney felt himself stiffen, and his ears strained for the next sound, the crunch of footsteps on the gravel pathway. He peered intently into the darkness, pistol at the ready, for a long time.

After perhaps five minutes, when no one materialized, he was forced to conclude that the hoot had been a false alarm. He relaxed a bit, soundlessly shifted his weight to the other leg as he crouched. His mind began to wander again, dancing lightly over remembered sounds and images—pretty ones, ugly ones, and finally, rather boring ones. He tried to gauge the amount of time he had been waiting. It seemed like hours. Cautiously, he eased his watch out of his pocket and, squinting, tilted it this way and that trying to catch a ray of moonlight that might have straggled into his hiding place. He thought the hands were spread flat across nine-fifteen, but he couldn't be sure.

The owl hooted a second time.

A cramped, frozen eternity later, Courtney heard his father's voice crackle through the air.

"Friar Tuck, Alan a Dale, out of the forest and back to the Clearing. I think we must scrap Plan A. No man in his right mind would expect a woman to wait an hour for him in this bloody weather."

Courtney emerged from the rhododendron, creaking in the knees, as Gerald appeared, a shadowy, melodramatic figure between the hedges.

"Why did you keep hooting, you great clown?" they chorused, glaring at each other.

"For Christ's sake," said Rayne, "don't you know a real owl when you hear one? Stop playing at Red Indians, and start thinking up another plan."

He stalked off towards the house. The two younger men followed, abashed but somehow lighthearted. From this end of the road, it did seem rather like a game of Red Indians or a farcical episode in the career of Robin Hood.

"You think he nosed out the plot?" asked Gerald.

Courtney shrugged. "He's probably sitting in the taproom at the George right now, laughing up his sleeve."

"Shouldn't be surprised."

It seemed that the formulation of a new plan would have to wait till morning. Once Lord Rayne had led the way back to the Armaments Room and seen that the pistols were stowed away, he snatched up a bottle of Courvoisier from the dining room and bolted for his wife's bedchamber. Gerald and Courtney exchanged rueful glances, and then each went to his own room. In passing, Courtney knocked lightly on his sister's door, but it was locked and no light showed.

By the time he had undressed, and warmed up in front of a good fire, it began to seem important to Courtney that Zoe be informed of the failure of the plot. She had appeared distressed by her part in it, and he hoped that they would be able to come up with another idea that would not involve her. He took up his taper, and made his way through the small walnut cubbyhole that separated the two bedrooms.

He rapped on the paneled door. "Zo?"

When there was no reply, he cracked the door and put his head round. He could see nothing but the outlines of the curtained bed, by the glow of the dying fire.

"Zoe, my love, the scoundrel didn't show up. I don't know what we'll try next, but... Zo? Have you dosed yourself with laudanum?"

He pulled back the bedcurtains and stared for several seconds at the smooth coverlet. The bed was quite empty. He lit the lamp. The room was empty. Slowly, he crossed over to the dressing table. In the jewel case, he could not find the small pouch of gold coins he knew was kept there against emergencies. And he could not find the neat little silver-mounted pistol he had given his sister two birthdays ago.

"Oh, *God*," said Courtney.

# *XVIII*

Zoe was at that time availing herself of neither the money nor the pistol, though both were indeed secreted about her person. She was seated, not uncomfortably, under a fur rug in a light traveling coach that flew down the frozen road as fast as four fresh horses could pull it.

"You are a woman of great character, my dear," commented Monteuil, breaking a lengthy silence.

Zoe made no reply.

The Count tried again.

"You have been to France before, my lady?"

"I spent a few weeks in Paris, two years ago."

"A charming city, of strong contrasts; much that is disquieting, but also much that is beautiful. I have always been very fond of Paris. It is a pity we may not live there. But I have been told that New Orleans is most invigorating, a growing, new world where one may live in great elegance in unusual surroundings. And I am sure you appreciate the opportunity for adventure."

Zoe put the slight queasiness in her stomach down to the extravagance of the coach's headlong pace.

"Do we sail directly from England to America?"

"Not direct, but within a day or two of arriving in France. Our passage is booked, Madame, as man and wife. I assume you would prefer to be married before we sail."

The Count's teeth flashed as he smiled. He sat opposite his prize, knees covered, like hers, with fur. He swayed, like her, with the motion of the carriage. Zoe felt ugly and degraded.

"Will you allow me to see my sister-in-law before we

sail? I should be easier in my mind if I knew she was well."

"Do not concern yourself, Madame. Your sister-in-law's affair will be seen to."

"Perhaps you are unaware," Zoe went on, "that she is in a delicate condition. It is imperative that she be treated with the utmost gentleness and consideration."

"Your interest is touching," replied the Count blandly.

"I hope she will not be subjected to a long journey," Zoe persisted.

"Madame," said Monteuil, obviously amused, "you will not see her, nor will you discover where she is, nor at what distance, nor under what conditions. That is my affair entirely."

"Not entirely." Zoe put her head up. "We made a bargain, M. le Comte."

"And now you must trust me," he rejoined, once more without expression.

Stymied, Zoe settled back. The carriage rocked along, grinding the pistol against her thigh where it pressed against the side panel. She shifted her weight.

After a few more minutes, they pulled into a coaching stop for a change of horses. As the coach drew up, Monteuil moved from the seat opposite and sat down next to Zoe. She waited for someone to come open the door. When no one did, she looked at Monteuil inquiringly, expecting him to do something about it.

"We do not get down at this station, Madame," he said.

"But I wish to get down, Monsieur," she retorted haughtily.

"So long as we are in England," he informed her calmly, "you will not show yourself. Aboard the *Belle Hélène*, we will be married, and after that, of course, you will be permitted a greater degree of freedom. And in time," he went on, more gently, "you will come to accept me. When the old life has faded into memory, you will acknowledge in me your master, and I shall begin to trust you. Then we will begin to live a real life. Someday you will come to understand what a great love it is I have for you."

He crowded her into a corner of the coach. Zoe felt the pistol pinned under her leg.

"It's not love that drives you," she flashed suddenly. "It is sheer greed—selfishness, acquisitiveness. You don't want me to share your life; you want to own me! If you loved me, you could not humiliate me so! You could not distress me so, taking me away from everything I hold dear and never even allowing me the satisfaction of knowing whether my sacrifice was in vain or not. Perhaps you have not even got my sister!"

"I have got your sister," he said coldly. "But you will not see her. There is not time, before our ship sails. I do not wish to discuss this further, Madame."

It was an order. Zoe turned her face to the wall and closed her eyes, pretending to sleep as the carraige dashed on for Dover. She felt the warm pressure of the man's leg against hers on the one side, the lump of the pistol on the other. She tried to plan how and when she would make her move. If, as he seemed to be, the Count was determined to prevent her from seeing Susan, then it would be best for her to dispatch him soon. She doubted she would have a chance once they were aboard the *Belle Hélène*. But when would she get a chance before that? So far, the Count had succeeded in thwarting her every effort to alter his plans.

Her thoughts began to fix upon the pistol. She recalled its handsome chased silver fittings, its short steel barrel. She imagined it, cool and hard in the palm of her hand. She was a good shot, and she would have the element of surprise in her favor. She pictured Monteuil's eyes as she threatened him, no longer his captive but his captor. Just as she thought of how she would carefully, smoothly squeeze the trigger, a shot blasted out through the night air.

"Stand ye, and deliver!" bellowed a rough voice.

The coach came to a lurching, swerving halt as the terrified horses, fresh still and skittish, plunged and careered into each other, dragging unevenly on the reins. The coachman, howling imprecations at the animals and

blandishments at the highwaymen, managed to bring the coach up just short of the ominous trio that blocked the road.

"'Ullo, wot you got there?" growled the same, rough voice.

"A gentleman," babbled the coachman. "And a lady. No baggage, no valuables."

The man grunted skeptically. His companions brought their horses round the coach.

"Gentlemen," came Monteuil's icy voice from inside, "I think you should know that I am armed, and I shall have no hesitation in using my weapon on the first man who makes a move to open the door of this carriage."

"Furrin, wot," remarked a second man, in a low rasp. "Makin' for the coast, hey?" He spat on the ground. "Good riddance, I say. Damn' Frenchies."

"If I was you," suggested the third man to the driver, confidentially, "I'd 'op it before the shootin' starts. 'E looks a rum 'un, this Frenchy o' yours."

The coachman, singularly impressed by the cogency of this advice, inched down from the box and prepared to take to his heels.

The first man, apparently the band's leader, answered Monteuil's threat.

"It may be you're armed, as you say, but there's one of you and three of us. It will be much more pleasanter for all if you just climb on out'n the coach, politely, without a kick-up. Otherwise, I may 'ave to put a ball through the winder, so's you'll know for sure we're bad blokes to cross."

"Wait, there, Guv'nor," put in the second man. "There's a lady in there, 'e said. You can't go shootin' through the winder wiv a lady inside. Come on out, Frenchy. We don't want to 'urt yer lady."

Inside the coach the Count, who had magically become equipped with a powerful-looking pistol as soon as the first shot had been heard, frowned, and considered, and made up his mind.

"Softly now," said the bandit leader, as the coach door opened. "No tricks."

As the first corner of silken skirt became visible, the man with the poor opinion of Frenchmen valuted off his horse to help Zoe down. She neither leaned on his proffered arm, nor tried to brush it away. She simply stared straight ahead as though the man did not exist.

Unabashed, he circled round her making a critical survey.

"Looks to be the genuine article, right enough. A lady! Pretty, werry pretty."

He gave her a little dig in the ribs. Zoe maintained her impassivity.

"Not much meat on 'er, though. Let's see yer 'ands, ducks." He removed a limp, unresisting hand from the fox-fur muff. "Werry nice. Lady's 'ands to be sure. 'Ere we 'ave a hemerald. Partial to hemeralds, m'self," he confided, giving the hand a squeeze. "And a bit of a somefin' as might be a ruby. But no weddin' ring. You know wot this 'ere circumstance looks like to me, Guv'nor? It looks like a e-lopement."

The Guv'nor had been overseeing the descent of the Count from the carriage.

"Come now, sir," he spoke reproachfully, "I'd be obliged if you'd give up that pistol wivout obligin' me to shoot it out of your 'and. It might go off and 'urt somebody, like the lady there. Hand it over to my lieutenant; be a sport, sir."

"If this pistol makes any move in the direction of your 'lieutenant,'" replied Monteuil, through his teeth, "it will be to shoot him. Order him to leave madame alone."

"Wot I say," intervened the lieutenant, "is that people as is elopin' is likely to 'ave about 'em some waluables, even if they ain't got bags and baggage. Hit is my hopinion as 'ow the lady should be searched proper."

"Monsieur," said Monteuil, addressing the "Guv'nor," "your second lieutenant is edging round behind my coach. You will order him out to where I can see him. You have three seconds. And you, *canaille*," he added on a rising note to the first lieutenant, "get away from my wife!"

With a conciliatory shrug, the highwayman moved a little away from Zoe. But he had had time enough.

"Now for the love of God, Zo," he had hissed, "keep your head. On the least pretext, he'll blow Rayne's chest open. We've got to stop him cold. You slip round behind him, as if you're afraid. Then you see how he's standing, with his feet apart? Bring your knee up between his legs. I know it's dirty, but it'll work, if you really put your back into it. Don't just startle him, *paralyze* him."

For a moment Zoe herself was paralyzed. Was it possible that the crude cockney in the smelly old coat had addressed her in her brother's finely articulated tones? Was it possible that the burly fellow facing Monteuil's wicked pistol was her father? In an instant, she accepted that it must be so. Slightly dazed, she moved slowly towards the Count, as ordered.

Monteuil noted with pleasure that she had come to seek his protection. It was the last pleasant thought he had.

"Bravo!" yelled Courtney.

"*Jesus*," said Gerald.

Lord Rayne just flinched as Monteuil doubled over making a strange, breathless sort of sound that should have been a scream. His gun dropped from nerveless fingers and exploded into the ground. Zoe clutched him round the shoulders, paradoxically mumbling apologies.

Rayne pulled off the muffler that masked his face, and began rapping out commands.

"Gerald, is the coachman well and truly gone?"

"Yes, sir, I think so. Gustaf will make sure of it."

"Lee, see to your sister while I revive Monteuil. We're not done with him, by any means."

A few moments of energetic activity saw to the establishment of order. Gustaf appeared out of the woods and verified that the coachman was probably halfway to the next village by now. Gerald plied the Count solicitously with brandy as he sat, shaking, on the trunk of a fallen tree. Courtney held his sister in his arms. She cried softly. Lord Rayne had not spoken to her.

"Count," he asked finally, "are you sufficiently restored to speak to us?"

"I am," said Monteuil, his eyes black and unfathomable.

"I sincerely regret," Rayne went on, "that we have been constrained to resort to such theatricals. I believe, however, that our business can now be concluded simply. In a word: if you will divulge now the whereabouts of my daughter-in-law, I will detain you only so long as it takes to find her and return her to her home; you will then be released, upon condition that you quit this country immediately and do not ever return."

"And if I do not agree to divulge the whereabouts of your daughter-in-law, my lord Rayne?"

"I will shoot you here and now, and leave your body lying on the frozen ground, victim of murderous highwaymen, as your erstwhile coachman will confirm."

"A desolate picture indeed," smiled the Frenchman. "But dead men do not feel the cold, I believe." He contemplated the still face above the pistol trained on his heart, and shook his head. "I have gambled and lost. So be it. I strike no bargains."

"Ah," said Rayne. "A gentleman at the last. Tell us, then, not because we have defeated you, but solely for the sake of your own conscience. I will still shoot you, if you prefer."

Monteuil smiled again.

"No, I will not tell you. But I will tell you one thing, in homage to your subtlety of mind, Lord Rayne. I will tell you that, even if I wished to agree to your terms, it is too late."

"The Countess is dead?" asked Rayne.

Courtney's arms tightened about his sister, as they stood watching and listening. No, he thought, as if willing the Count's answer. No, no, no.

"Not yet," said Monteuil. "But there is a man at present on his way to France to see that her disappearance becomes permanent. If you can find some way to prevent him, you are welcome."

"What man? How does he travel? What is his route, his destination?" fired Rayne.

"Ah, *tout de même*! You do not expect me to make it easy for you? We have not become friends, just better enemies."

"How can we get him to talk?" cried Courtney. "There must be a way!"

All eyes were turned appraisingly on the quiet-faced Frenchman in the moonlight. His black eyes shone, almost with amusement. There was no fear in him.

"I suppose," said Rayne finally, "there exists somewhere in the world, in the dungeons of the Turks or the mountain retreats of the Mongols, a torture that would make him talk. But I don't know it, and if I did, I couldn't use it. No, we must kill him cleanly, and get on with our job in the best way we know. Lee, make sure of the pistols, would you? We don't want a misfire."

Courtney inspected the priming of his own pistol, and then exchanged it for Rayne's, which he also checked, and then handed back. Rayne held one in reserve, and sighted along the barrel of the second.

"Do you wish to stand?" he asked.

The Count nodded, and stood up.

"Have you any last words?"

"Your daughter is a gallant woman, Monsieur. She never intended to submit to me. She intended, I think, to kill me with the small pistol in her pocket before we left England. She would not have succeeded, of course, but she is a gallant woman, and brave."

He bowed slightly in Zoe's direction. Zoe looked surprised, and frightened, but she managed to give him a minimal inclination of the head in return.

"Monsieur," he said, saluting his executioner.

"Monsieur," said Rayne.

He sighted again, and fired.

"And now for the spoils," he said, a few minutes later.

He looked down into his hand where he held a large diamond ring, a watch with a fine enameled face, a gold signet, and a quantity of coins, French and English.

"For you," he said, holding the diamond ring out to Zoe.

"Papa," she protested, feeling nauseous, "I don't want—"

"Of course you do not," he replied. "But you must. We must all remember this day's work for the rest of our lives. We will wear these tokens as our personal mark of Cain."

Zoe shuddered, but Courtney took the enameled watch without a word and put it in his pocket. Lord Rayne slipped the gold signet ring on his littlest finger, and turned the bezel in towards the palm of his hand.

"Gerald, my lad," he went on, "if you would just take charge of the cash. Perhaps the poor box of a church, or several churches, would be the best we could do. Now, then."

He turned to survey the scene: the coach, its horses cut loose and run for home, the trail of blood, partially erased by scraping feet, and the body, dragged and dumped into the ditch and ineffectually camouflaged with leaves and bits of debris. Rayne stared at it, and sighed.

"'I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?'"

"Papa, Monteuil was no good king Duncan," said Zoe.

"No more he was. But he was a man, and now he is a lump of carrion, oozing out his life into the dust. I have played God, and I feel inadequate to the role."

"You should have let me do it," said Courtney fiercely.

Lord Rayne looked him up and down.

"If you had done it," he said softly, "it would have been murder."

The passion died slowly out of Courtney's eyes as he faced his father, and after some moments he too turned to contemplate the corpse, pathetic and terribly human. But he could not feel pity for M. de Monteuil. All he could feel was horror that within a few days, perhaps a few hours, there would be another such body in another ditch, somewhere in France, and there was almost nothing he could do to prevent it.

"Rayne," he said, "I think I'll have a go at finding that lackey he dispatched to France. I'll ask round at Dover; perhaps he's made himself conspicuous in some way. Don't tell me it's a fool's errand. I have to try!"

"By all means," said Rayne. "Take Gustaf. We'll manage here."

As Courtney swung into the saddle and pounded off, with Gustaf in his wake, he added in a voice only Zoe could hear, "Take care of yourself, boy."

The midnight loneliness closed in, with its piercing cold and dim unearthliness. Zoe, standing behind her father under a tree, shivered, and wrapped the coney-fur rug tighter about her shoulders.

"Now then, Gerry," said Rayne. "We'd best be off too, before a pack of villagers alarmed by the coachman comes along to investigate. Give Zoe a leg up on Chester, then you head on home at a good clip. I'll get up with Zo and we'll come behind you at a quieter pace."

Gerald obeyed, and left Zoe perched on the sturdy chestnut with her knee crooked about the pommel. Rayne went back once more to the dead man, stood for a little, and then came back to Zoe. He swung up behind her, and held the reins from around her waist, as he had when she was a very little girl.

"You are a heedless, wicked, ungrateful child," he said, pressing his face against her hair. "I intend to beat you when we get home."

"Oh, Papa," said Zoe, "I thought I could get more out of him by feminine wiles than you could by threatening him. But I was much mistaken."

"We all were. Lee was right, we should have shot him on the spot, when first he came to us with his ridiculous proposal. Then at least he wouldn't have had the chance to order Susan done away with."

"*Why* did he do that?" asked Zoe. "I had agreed to his terms!"

"I think perhaps your agreement wasn't enough. He must have known that we would come after him, and catch up to him sooner or later. The only way his scheme would have worked was if Courtney and I had both agreed as well, and forsworn reprisals."

"He was going to take me to New Orleans."

"We would have found you," said Rayne, "even there, my love."

# *XIX*

Susan paced seven paces up and seven paces down the length of her cubicle in the convent. She paced partly because she was restless and partly because she was cold. The weather was so disagreeable that everyone had taken to wearing a blanket as a shawl and spending most of their time in the kitchen, where there was a fire. Susan was in her cell because she couldn't bear to hem another altar cloth, and she didn't like to sit in the kitchen doing nothing while everyone else was working. Besides, she wanted to think. So she had left the kitchen and brought Nancy with her. Nancy sat on the hard little bed, with her feet tucked up tailor-style under her skirts for warmth.

"Do you suppose," asked Susan, "he will never write? Do you suppose he just thinks, good riddance?"

"I think it more likely that he failed to receive your letter, my lady," said Nancy.

"Perhaps I should write again. But if one letter has gone astray, another may just as easily do the same."

Nancy couldn't think of anything to say to this.

"I think he is still vexed," Susan announced. After several more paces, she went on, "But if he never got my letter, then he has no idea where we are. It will be very embarrassing for him, and he will be still more vexed." Finding herself at the wall, she leaned her forehead against it. "I can't bear it. He is with that hateful Clarke woman and has forgotten I ever existed. When somebody says, 'Whatever happened to that wife of yours?' he says, 'Who? Oh, the little girl from the country. Don't know; ran off somewhere.'"

Nancy knew better than to say anything at this point.

"That bitch! What a horrible woman. How can he like her?" She kicked at the base of the wall with her heavy borrowed boots. "But if he is never going to write, and I know I shall give in and go home anyway, why not go now and get it over with?"

"Why not, indeed, my lady?" said Nan, with a palpitating heart. Poor Nancy wished for nothing so fervently as to go home. She had even begun to pray to the Virgin about it, she whose parents quailed at the very word "Papism." "Consider also, ma'am, that his lordship may be worried, if he has not heard from you."

"Oh, well, I daresay he has found Monteuil. Yes, that's true; he must have found from Monty where we are. Perhaps he just doesn't want us back."

"Perhaps he has not seen M. de Monteuil. M. de Monteuil was heading for Paris, as you recall."

"Yes, but Monty seemed so sure my lord would challenge him. Oh, my God, Nan, what if he has been killed? What if he is hovering on the brink of the grave, all because I am headstrong and cowardly? Oh, Nan, we *must* go home! We must find out!" Susan began to hop up and down in her agitation. "This very instant, we must start! Oh, dear, I am sure they fought a horrible stupid duel and my dear lord is at this moment languishing in a squalid hotel in Paris, some vile place with cockroaches and spiders and . . . lice, I dare swear, and—"

"My lady!" cried Nancy. "Even if by some chance his lordship should be ill, he would not be dying in a hovel!"

"Then he is dying in a palace! And all because I am flighty!" Susan threw herself flat on the floor to pull her valise out from under the cot. "I should have tried harder! I should have been more reasonable. I should have . . ."

Trailing off, she began to throw things into the valise in her most impulsive, scatterbrained manner.

"My lady, let me help you," said Nan. She did not wish to encourage the Countess in her belief that his lordship was in a desperate condition, but she certainly did not wish to dampen her sudden enthusiasm for going home. Never mind that the cold was growing more severe and that it looked like snow. Never mind that night would fall

in a couple of hours. Never mind anything but getting started as soon as possible!

"What if he is already dead, if he was killed in the duel, days ago?" Overcome by this thought, Susan sank onto the bed and left the valises to Nancy.

"If he were dead, my lady, you would surely have been notified. You carry his heir, you know."

"Yes, but he doesn't... Well, never mind that. I don't really think he is dead. If he were, I'd have felt it in my bones. Across the void, you know, a voice calling out, spirits in communication despite the grave, that sort of thing."

The abigail's face, averted, was a study.

"I know what you're thinking," said Susan. "You're wondering if I've forgotten how beastly he can be, how he drinks too much, and how we used to quarrel. But that's not his real self, Nan; that was all because of a misunderstanding. Once the misunderstanding is straightened out, he will be dear and tender, and fond of me as he was at first. You'll see."

Nancy hoped so. She had little faith in such a miracle, but she hoped so.

Susan's eyes softened and her gaze was far away. "There were times, Nan, times when I could almost fancy he was in love with me. He would kiss me, and laugh, and touch my hair... Well, anyway, you pack the valises. I'll go speak with Reverend Mother. Perhaps she can give us escort as far as the main road. It's the road to Paris, after all; there must be diligences. We may have to wait, but who cares? We shall be on our way home!"

Exhilarated by this thought, the Countess sailed out the door and down the draughty cloister towards Reverend Mother's office, where a light burning in the window showed that she too had braved the cold outside the kitchen.

"We're going home, we're going home," sang Susan's feet as they clumped along the stone floor.

"I am sorry, Madame, but that is impossible," said Reverend Mother.

Susan blinked. She sat opposite the tall, grey nun, her

hands folded neatly in her lap. She had just made what she thought was a gracious speech explaining that she had come to feel it was time for her to take her leave.

"Well," said Susan, "I daresay we may be inconvenienced by not having our own transportation, but I don't think it will be impossible. We can manage. You needn't escort us."

"That is not my meaning, Madame. We should be happy to provide you with transportation in the donkey cart, if you were at liberty to go. But monsieur your cousin instructed me that you were to remain here until he sends word."

"Monsieur my cousin? Is that M. de Monteuil? Well, let me assure you that he is no such thing. Perhaps he thought it was not quite respectable to bring us, unless we were relatives, but I'm afraid we are not. There is no reason I should wait for word from him."

"Perhaps not, Madame. It is I who must await word."

Susan wrinkled her brow in annoyance.

"Nonsense, Reverend Mother," she said crisply. "M. de Monteuil has no authority over me. He is not my cousin, and even if he were, I am a married woman. I wish to rejoin my husband."

"I am sorry, Madame. Monsieur le Comte has informed me of the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the man you call your husband."

Susan jumped up. "I beg your pardon! The man I call my husband *is* my husband, and there are no unfortunate circumstances surrounding Lord Courtney, who is a very great English nobleman and will be a marquess, which is much more than your little French count!"

"Yes, Madame," said Reverend Mother. "I realize that he is a great nobleman, and I deplore his conduct the more on that account, though there are some who would excuse it. I do understand, however, that that is why he was unable to marry you, though I have no doubt he wished to."

"Damn you!" shrieked Susan. "I mean . . . damn *it*! My lord did marry me, according to all proper forms, and very handsome it was in him too, because I would have

been his mistress instead, if he had wanted it. But he didn't, and he married me for sure and for true—*if* it's any of your business!"

Reverend Mother, except for crossing herself upon being damned, appeared unmoved.

"Madame, I beg you will compose yourself. Monsieur your—Monsieur le Comte has explained the entire situation to me. He did say that you had refused to acknowledge the illegitimacy of your marriage, but I am afraid—"

"*You* are afraid! *I* am afraid that if M. de Monteuil told you that my marriage was a mockery, he was lying through his teeth, and well he knew it! I was married in my own village, in my own church, by my own churchman, whom I've known since I was nine years old! There was nothing sham about my wedding, and my marriage is a solidly legal one. M. de Monteuil has told you a great deal of wicked nonsense. He is *not* my cousin and he has *no* right to have me detained here, and if my husband had only answered my letter, you would see—Oh!" All the righteous fury was drained from Susan's face as she realized the implication of the Count's treachery. "If he lied to you and told you to keep me here, then surely he never sent my letter to Lee or told him where I was. So he *doesn't* know! Oh, he must be upset. At the very least, the awkwardness... I'm sure you see, Reverend Mother, I really must go. I don't know what Monteuil wanted to keep me here for, some silly prank, I daresay. But I *must* go now. You must let me have my money, from your strongbox, and Nan and I must be off."

"I am sorry," repeated Reverend Mother maddeningly. "I am not authorized to permit your departure."

"But I've explained it all! Monteuil has nothing to do with me. He's just an acquaintance!"

Reverend Mother began to finger her rosary.

"Madame, Monsieur le Comte may, as you say, have nothing to do with you, but he has everything to do with the nuns here. We exist only by his generosity. It is his land we live on, Madame; the buildings all belong to him."

"And the people belong to him as well, I see! You are a dishonest woman, Madame, a disgrace to your habit! I demand my money! Or have you stolen it already?"

Susan had no particular motive in requesting the return of her purse of gold coins. She wished simply to insult the Reverend Mother, who sat so quietly in the face of her indignation. Reverend Mother did not appear insulted. She got up and went to a banded wooden coffer, which she unlocked by means of a key hanging from her girdle, and took out a purse heavy with coins. Susan opened it, and ran her fingers through the gold pieces as if to make sure coins of baser metal had not been substituted underneath.

"It is all there, Madame," said Reverend Mother.

"I shall count it," said Susan.

She turned and walked stiffly to the door of the bare little office, without another word. She stopped when the Reverend Mother addressed her once more.

"Madame, I must inform you that I shall be obliged to watch you carefully as soon as night falls, and lock your door as you sleep from now on."

"You will do as you think right, Madam," said Susan.

As soon as she had closed the door behind herself, Susan started to cry. She ran blindly down the cloister to her cubicle. Nancy waited for her, with the two valises standing side by side at the door. She cried out in alarm as the Countess grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her into the cell.

"We are prisoners! But we will not stand for it, Nan. We shall leave right away. We'll climb over the wall! We can leave the valises and go by the kitchen. We'll climb a tree. Come, Nan, we have no time at all!"

"Prisoners?" echoed Nancy. She was a little dazed, and more than half convinced her ladyship was being melodramatic again.

"Monteuil has made us prisoners. God knows why. Reverend Mother says we may not leave, and as soon as night falls she will have us watched, and locked in. But we shan't be here when night falls! We must set out this very instant."

"We'll take the blankets," Nancy decided, "and put on our extra petticoats, and maybe even a second dress. We'll leave the valises, of course, and—"

Susan's tears dried on her cheeks as she realized that Nancy had accepted her plan. She even began to think it had a chance of working.

"I got our money," she said, brandishing the purse.

"Money," said Nan, "is always useful."

They helped each other into another layer of clothes each. Susan's would not fasten down the back, being already too small in the waist, but the blanket she wore as a shawl covered the opening. They stuffed into their pockets a hairbrush, a toothbrush, some handkerchiefs, and a handful of hairpins. Susan's rubies were dug out of the purse and fastened about her neck, and carefully tucked inside her dress, out of sight. Nancy thanked heaven for the strong boots they were both wearing, but with her eventual arrival at Boulogne in mind, Susan jammed a silk stocking and a kid slipper into each pocket. Then they proclaimed themselves ready to depart. Their preparation had taken barely fifteen minutes.

When they stepped out into the cloister, the two rather lumpy, rather hot young ladies saw no one about, but they did not look too hard, for fear of arousing suspicions in any chance observer. They walked down the cloister towards the kitchen, pacing slowly, as if they were deep in conversation.

Nancy remarked, "My lady, I wonder if Reverend Mother will not be surprised to find we have slipped away. If she was at pains to warn you we would be watched after tonight, I think she may make an effort to look the other way till then. She can always tell M. de Monteuil we slipped away unexpectedly."

"Maybe," replied Susan. "Maybe my harangue convinced her, at least a little. For I did harangue! You should have heard her, telling me 'the man I call my husband' was such a shabby fellow as to jump the broomstick with me. I was furious!" As they wandered off behind one of the storage bins behind the kitchens, she pointed to a slender, branchy pine standing near the wall.

"There! That's a good one. We can scramble up, then jump down from the wall to the ground outside. Quick now, we're out of sight!"

They ran to the selected pine tree, and Nancy helped the Countess, weighed down by voluminous skirts, clamber up to the first branch. Then Susan pulled the maid up by the arms, and they climbed a few feet higher, to some ten feet above the ground where they could look across and down to the red-tiled top of the enclosure wall.

Nancy was uneasy. "It looks slippery," she said, with a wrinkling of the nose.

Susan giggled. "At least it slopes toward the outside. All these great petticoats should cushion our fall. But don't try to land on your feet on those tiles—land square on your bottom!"

With these words of advice, the Countess launched herself at the wall, came down on the tiles with a thump in a sitting position, and slid off, feet first, outside the confines of the convent. Nancy saw a billow of skirts, then her mistress disappeared. There was a distressing medley of bumps and crackles, then a cheerful voice floated up.

"I fell on a pile of sticks, but I'm fine. Jump in the same place, Nan, and I'll catch you."

Nancy, by now thoroughly unnerved, hurled herself awkwardly at the wall, banged an elbow, and tumbled off helter-skelter in, providentially, the right direction. She fell on top of the Countess, and both of them went sprawling, but they came up unhurt and as Susan laughed heartily, Nancy was soon able to give a breathless giggle too.

"I'm really quite afraid of high-up places, my lady," the maid admitted shamefacedly. "I beg your pardon; I was so clumsy."

"No harm done," said Susan, picking herself up and brushing off her skirts. "We are out, free, and on our way home!"

She danced Nancy around for an elated moment, then, gathering up their petticoats, they ran for the woods a few yards away. Soon they were out of sight of the convent.

Gauging the light, they judged they had about an hour before nightfall.

"We'll edge round," said Susan, leading the way at a brisk pace, "and rejoin the road out of sight of the main gates, then we'll follow it. There may be a more direct route, through the woods, but we don't want to get lost." She shifted the blanket over her shoulders, and glanced up at the sky. "I'm sure it will snow soon."

"What if we meet someone on the road, my lady? We shall be a curious sight!"

"We shan't meet anybody. If we hear horses, we shall take cover in the woods. And if we meet a farmer or somebody out walking, he will surely be too much interested in getting home to pay us any mind."

"Perhaps," suggested Nancy shyly, "if you wore one of my dresses, instead of yours, we should simply look like farm women ourselves. And it would save your dress for when we arrive in Boulogne."

The Countess approved. Shivering in the sharp wind, they both took off their two dresses, and when they were clothed once again, Susan wore one of Nancy's sensible broadcloth frocks on top of her own patterned chinz kirtle and quilted petticoat.

"When we get to town, I can slip off my top layer, and become Lady Lakewood again in a twinkling. We shall surely find *some*body to impress with our consequence!"

They walked the first two or three miles in little more than an hour, buoyed up by the excitement of their escape and the knowledge that they were on their way home. On the little roads leading to the Paris thoroughfare, they met no one. Just as they came in sight of the highway, the snowfall began, first in light flurries, then in thicker gusts that made them huddle gratefully into the blankets they had first found to be a hot, heavy nuisance. Twice carriages passed them, driving at such speeds they could hear the noise with ample time to hide in the woods.

"That lot there will be in Boulogne in half an hour," Susan commented wistfully, gazing after a gorgeous equipage, a coach and six steaming horses that had

hurtled past at a flat-out gallop.

"Or in the ditch in five minutes, my lady," replied Nan.

"I wish we dared trust someone," sighed Susan.

But they didn't, and they trudged on, past a few isolated houses, closely shuttered for the night, and through the first village, a very small one. There was a tavern of sorts in the cellar of one of the buildings that fronted the road, for they could hear shouts and smell smoke and spilled wine through the door. The wine smell was acrid, and the voices rough, but they lingered for a moment, wondering if they might go in for a short rest. As they loitered, undecided, the door opened and a coarsely-clad peasant staggered out. He squinted at them, and lurched forward with a leer. The two young women quickly turned and hurried on their way.

Beyond the first village, the going got harder. Although the falling snow mitigated the darkness, a biting wind snaked inland from the sea, and the snow had begun to mask treacherous ruts in the road. The travelers' pace slowed, and their progress became no more than a dreary matter of placing one foot in front of the other, in endless sequence. By the time the first houses of the next village came into view, Susan had decided they would probably not survive the rest of the journey into Boulogne, and they began to look for some place to take shelter. Nancy, remembering the drive out to the convent, a bare four weeks before, thought that this was a more considerable settlement than the one they had passed through before, and believed she had noticed a decent-looking public hostelry somewhere nearby along the road.

"It's neck or nothing, my dear," gasped Susan, falling into a sitting position against a tree. "We mustn't forget the heir." She crumpled into a little ball and moaned, by association, "My stomach hurts."

"Oh, no!"

Nancy squatted down and put her arms round her mistress. She found it very unpleasant to cry when the tears froze on her face.

"It's not the child that hurts, just my stomach," Susan

reassured her. "I think I'm hungry. My lord, I *am* hungry!"

Now that the thought had come into their minds, they both realized they were very hungry indeed, and the protests of their insides were added to the discomforts of the out of doors. They clung to each other for a few moments, for warmth and comfort, then Susan forced herself to sit upright. She pulled her thick little boots and her woolen stockings off, exchanging them for the silk hose and her kid slippers. Then, with great reluctance, she took off Nancy's broadcloth dress and together they shoved the little pile of clothes under a bush.

"God, oh God, it is so cold," complained the Countess, her teeth chattering. "But we don't want to be turned out, as ragamuffin vagabonds. We haven't got enough money to offer a really fine bribe, for we shall need it for our passage home."

She did, however, accept one of the inelegant blankets about her shoulders, and the two set out again, sloughing laboriously through the drifting snow.

Nancy, considerably emboldened by circumstance and having picked up a useful vocabulary, pounded mercilessly on the door of the first house they came to. "I know you're in there," she screamed. "I can see the smoke of a fire. Answer the door, for the love of God!"

After a few minutes, this produced a face at a window. When questioned, in the same remorseless shrieking tones, the face made a noiseless inclination in the direction of Boulogne, and then disappeared.

"I think he means the inn is a bit further on down the street, ma'am," Nan insisted encouragingly.

She put a supportive arm round her mistress, who was now having to exercise no histrionic talent in appearing to be a sensitive female of quality on the brink of a hysterical breakdown.

They made their way down the street, until Nancy caught sight of a much-weathered hanging sign which seemed to represent an animal in some sort of uncharacteristic bright green. The shape of the animal and the

lettering above were much obscured by the snow, but it was surely the sign of an inn. Nancy beat once more on the nearest door.

This time, it opened with dispatch. Willing hands caught at the Countess, who stumbled pitifully and collapsed. The man who received her into his ample embrace introduced himself to Nancy as Emile Durand, owner and operator of the Auberge Au Signe du Poisson Vert. Nancy, seeing that her mistress was in good hands, then permitted herself the luxury of fainting as well.

When the maid came to, she heard Susan babbling indignantly, "A dreadful rogue! The most odious creature! It looked like snow, you know, and it was difficult to hire a carriage at all, but I was particularly anxious to reach England today or tomorrow, so I hired this... this *villain*! And when we overturned (as I knew we should, for he drove shockingly), what did he do but take to his heels, with a lying tale that a coachwheel was smashed and he needs must seek aid."

"My dear madame," murmured the innkeeper, in tones of deepest sympathy.

"He said, Monsieur, that a coachwheel was smashed, but after an hour, monsieur, of waiting and freezing, an entire, interminable, *glacial* hour, my maid and I got out to see what, if anything, we might do to help ourselves. And we found that although the coachwheel was indeed off, it was *not* broken. Of course my maid and I could not replace a coachwheel. Though I am sure that scoundrel of a driver could, only he was too lazy to do it alone!"

"A good-for-nothing, Madame," said M. Durand, with a disapproving click of the tongue.

"Good for nothing but trouble! But we were dauntless, my maid and I, Monsieur. We thought we could unharness the horses and ride to the next village, which, as it happened, was this one. I say we, Monsieur, because you can imagine I had no intention of being left alone out there, even if it meant riding a coach-horse! Oh, yes, thank you." Susan held out her cup to be refilled with hot spiced wine from the pot on the hearth. "Well, Monsieur, those beastly horses—only two, which is a scandal in

itself—one of them had kicked over his traces when we overset, and when Nan chased him he ran into the woods. And the other, Monsieur, the brute! He kicked me in the ankle."

She lifted her skirts a trifle, to examine the wound. M. Durand peered sympathetically at the shapely little foot, encased in expensive shoes and stockings.

"*Odious* animal!" Susan went on, enjoying herself immensely and encouraged by the hot wine. "I smacked him on the nose, which he thoroughly deserved, but then he kicked at me again, and bucked and danced about (though I didn't smack him as hard as all that), and then he ran away too. Wicked, nasty horses they were! So we had to walk. I had to leave my beautiful fur rug, which my lord got from Russia for my birthday, because it was so heavy, and my shoes are ruined, and my petticoat is so wet and dirty I shall never be able to wear it again. It is *too* dreadful! And in my C-C-Condition!"

She dissolved into tears, leaning heavily on the robust arm of the kindly murmuring M. Durand.

Madame Durand saw fit to intervene at this point, assuring her ladyship that the best thing for her would be to take some hot broth and go immediately to bed. In the morning, she would surely find herself fit to continue her journey.

"In the morning! But Madame, I had quite set my heart upon continuing to Boulogne tonight! It is only five miles, after all, and I wish to be on the very first ship for England tomorrow!"

Madame Durand threw her hands up in horror.

"Continue to Boulogne tonight, Madame? In this weather it could take hours to reach Boulogne! Why, we have a traveler who arrived an hour or so ago, and he said the road was nearly impassable. But he says the storm is moving out to sea; the worst of it, he said, was over the Channel as his boat landed, the last packet, he said, from Dover. In the morning, your ladyship will have a clear day for her journey, and by afternoon the sea will have gone down enough for ships to sail."

"Oh," said Susan. She thought longingly of hot broth

and bed. "You think no ships will sail till afternoon tomorrow?"

"At least, Madame," said M. Durand.

And very soon Susan was luxuriating in a hot bath, well laced with salts Mme. Durand pronounced to be most effective in warding off a cold in the head. Shortly thereafter, she sat bundled up in bed, devouring a bowl of thick soup, and within minutes after that, she lay back against the crisp white pillows and went blissfully to sleep.

# *XX*

"Not Piquart!" cried Lord Courtney. "Not the music master!"

The rambunctious, roistering group of sailors laughed and dug each other in the ribs. The one who had answered most of the questions raised his eyebrows and scratched his head dubiously.

"Dunno about that, yer lordship, but 'e were a funny little feller wiv great black mustachios. Frenchy fer sure. And like Long Tom says, 'e did 'ave a name Peek-sumpin."

"And an impossible bass voice."

"That's 'im. Great boomin' voice, comin' out'n a pipsqueak like 'im—funny as monkeys. Warn't 'e, boys?

There was an obliging round of laughter, and a few "Right you are's." Ale slopped over tables and knees as mugs were passed round.

"And you say he sailed on the packet to Boulogne?"

"Last one, milord. Ruddy great storm brewin'. No boats been across since-t."

"How much," said Courtney, "would you take to sail across now?"

Once more laughter billowed round the Dover tavern.

"No man in 'is right mind 'd set sail now," said the talkative sailor, "savin' yer lordship's pardon."

Courtney, not one to mince matters in a crisis, hauled a handful of coins out of his pocket, and slapped them down on the rough wooden table. Silence fell around him, and crept like a fungus over the room, till there was no sound at all.

Then a burly, bearded man in the corner belched

loudly, and lifted his mug to his big red mouth.

"In the ruddy middle o' the night, wi' the wind at forty knots and the sea heavin' under ye like a fat, drunk whore? Not for no money."

Courtney reached into his pocket again, and doubled the pile of gold on the table. There was a restless shifting of feet and scraping of mugs as the assembled seamen eyed the small fortune. Gustaf redistributed his considerable bulk in the doorway, and fingered the pair of pistols in his belt. The foot-shuffling ceased.

The bearded man belched again, raised his mug again, drained it, and tossed it to a serving wench.

"'Ave it filled and waitin' fer me," he said.

Then, with his hands in his voluminous pockets, he swaggered up to the center table. He picked up one of Courtney's sovereigns, and bit it. Then he threw one to each of three companions scattered about the room, and gathered the rest into his scarred but sturdy leather purse.

"Come on, boys," he said. "We're goin' to France. This wind, we'll be back in time for breakfast."

"If ye comes back at all," muttered several of the other men.

Of the three sailors chosen as mates, one decided that even a full twenty-five percent of the money offered was not enough to risk his life on the stormy seas, so Gustaf was enlisted as the third member of the crew, and the others divided the gold in equal thirds among them, and thought themselves that much better off. In a surprisingly short time, a boat was rigged and on its way, and Courtney was hanging weakly over the rail, with his eyes tightly closed against the horrendous sight of the churning, roiling, surging black water, and wishing he was dead.

As the skipper had predicted, the passage was rough but rapid. The wind made only one completely impossible shift, which almost capsized them, and then sent them scudding madly in the wrong direction. And the snow held off until they were, according to the skipper's calculations, almost to shore. There was an anxious moment when a beacon light appeared out of nowhere,

dead ahead and far too close for comfort, but disaster was averted by quick thinking and a skillful jibe. Then visibility abruptly increased as the last clouds of the storm raced out to sea, and the wildly tossing craft found herself in Boulogne harbor.

It was nearly an hour after landing before Courtney was ready to continue the journey on horseback. He needed time to swallow copious amounts of a harbor tavernkeeper's famed remedy for hangover, which worked equally well on rebellious stomachs of all kinds. It tasted unbelievably bad, but worked unbelievably well, and soon Courtney was feeling not only well enough to ride, but reasonably fit.

"If it weren't for this bloody snow," he complained to Gustaf, as they picked their way through the deserted city streets, "we'd be doing quite well. However, we must make do with what we have. We'll assume Piquart is our man, and we'll assume he's made his way along the main Paris road toward Monteuil's estate. You say he took a cup of wine in the harbor?"

Gustaf's information was that Piquart had stopped for a quick refreshment with several fellow passengers from England, all complaining bitterly about the roughness of the crossing. He had declined, however, to join them in making a night of it, saying that his business was urgent and he would have to press on.

"But in the vile weather, he can't have pressed on very far, or very fast," said Courtney. "We shall make much better time, for the storm is past and the wind has drifted the snow more to the sides of the road than on it. If only we could be sure this is the road he was taking!"

But they could not be sure, and though following the Paris road seemed as good a working hypothesis as any, inquiries at various inns and taverns, and a minor posting station on the outskirts of the town revealed nothing of M. Piquart's progress. Courtney began to doubt they were on the right track at all, and as the first light of the new morning began to appear, he was overcome with weariness.

"I've got to rest," he told his valet. "I am walking into

walls and seeing leprechauns in corners."

Gustaf made arrangements with the last-questioned landlord, a surly fellow named Jacques who had no love for prying strangers, for the hire of a room for his lordship for a few hours. It was not a fine room, but it was provided with a fire, and a large armchair, and, soon, a pot of coffee, brought in by a bold-eyed young woman. She poured the coffee, and set the pot on the hob. Courtney, slumped in the chair with his boots by his side and his feet stretched out in front of him, gave her a wave of dismissal as he stared into his coffee.

The young woman made for the door, then turned, and leaned against the jamb, one hand on her ample hip.

"I got something," she said, "I think would interest Your Eccellency."

"Mademoiselle, the only thing that interests me at the moment is peace and quiet."

She tossed her head.

"Something else interests you. But it's going to cost you." With a significant glance at his frilled shirt of delicate cambric and his emerald ring, she nodded to herself. "Plenty, it'll cost you."

"Go away," said Courtney, looking bored and exhausted.

"I heard you downstairs," said the young woman, "asking questions. You're an English milord, looking for a Monsieur Piquart, in the service of Monseigneur de Monteuil."

Courtney set his coffee cup down on the arm of the chair with a bang.

"Yes! Do you know the man? Have you seen him, heard anything about him?"

"I don't say I know him," replied the girl, "and I don't say I seen him, nor yet heard of him. But I might've. What are you paying?"

Courtney started up out of his chair, abandoning his coffee cup to its fate. He grabbed the girl by the arms and shook her, none too gently.

"I'll pay well, you silly wench, very well, if you can lead me to the man I'm looking for. I'll reward you handsomer

than you ever dreamed. But there's no time to be lost. If it's too late when I find him, you'll not get a sou!"

This made up her mind for her.

"I know a Piquart, from around here. Lives in England now, mostly, but he comes back now and then on business for my lord of Monteuil. It's a way to get home now and again, see."

She smirked significantly, but Courtney's patience was short. He shook her again.

"Has he been here tonight? *Is* he here?"

"Not now. But he was. Old Jacques didn't see him. But he came. He told me he has important business to do for my lord today, but he'll be home—back here, that is—in time for... dinner."

"My God! Gustaf! Where's my man? Gustaf! Quick girl, where has he gone, Piquart? Do you know?"

"He's gone on to the Green Fish. About five miles down the road."

"*Gustaf*!" yelled Courtney. "Horses! We'll be there in a quarter of an hour."

He threw his boots at the young woman, who helped him into them, and into his greatcoat, without objection.

As the valet appeared in the doorway, breathless, Courtney saluted him. "We've got him, Gustaf! Piquart is the lackey, all right. Business for the Count, he told this girl. God, it's incredible. Piquart, a spy in my own house all along!"

"In your house, my lord?" asked the girl. Though Courtney had been speaking to Gustaf, he had continued to use French.

"Yes, my house," he replied absently. "And now he's on the trail of my wife. The swine!"

"Your wife?" repeated the girl, apparently electrified.

"Yes, my wife. Gustaf, have we horses?"

"Pig!" shrieked the girl. "Filthy, stinking son of a whore!"

Courtney swung round with a look of stupefied incredulity on his finely moulded face. The girl shook her fist at him.

"For whom does he take himself? Fine English

miladies, is it? Not for my Piquart, never!"

"Ah, I see now why you know where he is when no one else does." Courtney flashed her a smile. "Come with us, then, little tigress."

The fiery young woman continued to rail, in terms not at all flattering to Lord Courtney, as she followed him at a run down the stairs and out into the courtyard. As he mounted, she flung herself onto the horse's broad rump. Gustaf came pounding along behind them.

When they reined in at the Green Fish, the hostel seemed to be awake and active, in spite of the early hour. A boy ran out to catch the horses' heads. When he recognized the young woman riding pillion, he let out a crow of laughter.

"Damme if you ain't going to catch it, Marie-Louise! Riding up bold as brass with these gentlemen! Don't you know Alphonse is here?"

"Alphonse?" snapped Courtney. "Is that Piquart? He hasn't left, then?"

Recollecting himself, the boy replied smartly, "No, Your Excellency, but just on the point of departure." Then he hurried away with the horses, abashed.

The first thing that met Courtney's eyes as he exploded into the foyer of the inn was the dapper M. Piquart, cloaked and hatted for travel, his paramilitary mustache bristling efficiently. He conversed quietly with the innkeeper. There were one or two ungainly packets on the floor. Several singularly austere and unappealing woollen blankets lay on a chair nearby. Courtney saw these sinister bits of baggage and paled.

"Milord Courtney!" cried Piquart, looking round. His face lighted up with an expression of pure delight. "How providential!"

Courtney, nonplussed, murmured ominously, "Providential indeed."

"But of course, milord, I am absurd. It is not providential at all. You have come to collect her ladyship, of course."

Courtney blinked.

Piquart's eye fell upon Marie-Louise, lurking in the background and suddenly demure.

"But here is my little friend! Pretty child, have you come to greet me? I am charmed."

Courtney found his tongue and demanded brusquely, "Where is my Countess?"

"Why, in her room, to be sure," put in M. Durand. "She is just this moment readying herself for the departure."

"We were setting off for Boulogne, milord," explained Piquart. "Milady insisted that it was not necessary I accompany her, but I am sure you understand that I overrode her objections, stemming as they did entirely from a generous wish to keep me from incommodation. But you realize, milord, that I would never hesitate to do milady the smallest service."

Courtney inclined his head impassively. This Piquart seemed to be a man of the most extraordinary sang-froid. Was it possible he had been warned, somehow, of Courtney's imminent arrival? Was it possible his companion, obviously the innkeeper, was in league with him to deceive the Englishman while his lady was spirited away under his very nose? And for that matter, how could it be that the hapless victim of the evil Count's plot was lodging in a public wayside inn?

It became clear, however, beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was so when Nancy Carson entered on the scene, carrying a tray of breakfast dishes down from upstairs.

"My lord!" she gasped. "My lord! You cannot imagine how glad I am to see you! Her ladyship will be... will be... With your permission, my lord—" she babbled, and, thrusting the tray into the arms of Marie-Louise, hitched up her skirts and prepared to bolt back up to Susan's room.

Courtney was still mystified, to a large extent, but was convinced that whatever Piquart's intended machinations had been, he had arrived in time to prevent them.

"Carson," he said quietly. "You will tell her ladyship to await me in her chamber. I shall be up directly."

Nancy paused.

"Yes, my lord," she curtsied, and then, subdued, made her way to her mistress.

Courtney began to have an inkling of what might have happened.

"Piquart," he said, "I should like a private word with you."

Piquart readily acquiesced. They were accordingly shown into a diminutive private closet.

"M. Piquart, are you at present in possession of a letter, to be delivered by you on behalf of M. le Comte de Monteuil?"

Piquart raised his thick black eyebrows.

"As it happens, milord, I am. It is, if you'll pardon me, a message of extreme importance, and I have been charged to deliver it with all possible speed. Of course, milord, I should not have grudged the time to escort milady, but you will appreciate that I am anxious to be on my way as soon as possible, now that I am assured she is in good hands."

"You are most conscientious, M. Piquart. You have, I take it, no notion of what is in the letter you carry?"

"Monsieur le Comte charged me only with its delivery."

It was on the tip of Courtney's tongue to ask who the letter was to have been delivered to, but he saw no real point to it.

"I should like to see this letter," he said. He held out his hand imperiously, but M. Piquart was not to be intimidated.

"I am sorry, milord, but the message is confidential. I was strictly enjoined to deliver it into none but the hand of a certain individual who has not the good fortune to be yourself."

Courtney's voice went flat, and his mouth tightened.

"Piquart, M. de Monteuil is dead. He was killed yesterday in my presence, and for good and sufficient cause. You owe him no further allegiance. Now, I have every reason to believe that the letter you carry is a

directive to murder. I insist that you surrender it to me."

Piquart was impressed. His eyes widened, and he stood up very straight and stroked his mustache. He thought the matter over.

"Milord," he decided, "I shall read this letter myself. I think it very likely that you have been misinformed, but all things are possible in this world. If this letter is what you say, then I will destroy it. I will have no hand in such nefarious dealings."

He reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a plain white envelope, and broke the unmarked seal. By the time he finished scanning the single sheet of plain white paper, Piquart was very grave. He handed the paper over without a word.

"Remove the two visitors from their retreat," Courtney read, in an anonymous copperplate hand. "Dispose of them at your earliest convenience."

There was no signature, no cachet, but in the lower left corner there was a small square, half inked in; this was apparently the cipher that gave the order authority.

Courtney closed his eyes, feeling a bit faint.

"Milord," began Piquart, "please allow me to assure your lordship that I had no idea, not the slightest idea in the world that—"

"I believe you," said Courtney. "And anyway, the danger is past now." He tossed the letter into the fire, and both men watched as it blackened and curled and crumbled away. Courtney saw no reason to enlighten Piquart as to who the "two visitors" referred to had been, but he did say, "I would most strongly suggest that this letter not be discussed with anyone."

"Indeed, milord," said Piquart, thinking of the law, "I could not agree with you more."

"Tell Marie-Louise," Courtney added, "that I shall see to her reward before I leave."

"Reward, milord?"

"For helping me to find you."

"It is rather I," said Piquart, "who should thank you, milord, for seeking me out. I am in truth most ardently

grateful for what I have every reason to believe has involved a most arduous and extraordinary personal effort on your part, milord—"

Courtney cut short what bid fair to spin out into a Gallic screed.

"Piquart, if you don't mind, I am impatient to rejoin my wife."

Piquart fell silent, and bowed his understanding. Courtney gave him a brief nod, and left the room.

Upstairs, Susan forced herself not to pace, lest her lord should hear her footsteps as he came through the hall. She did not wish him to know that she was nervous, or afraid. But now that she was on the point of facing him again, her hasty departure from England appeared to her to have been so foolhardy, so scandalously indecorous that she did not see how her husband would ever forgive her. And she remembered vividly how cruel he had been, how hard, and how angry. When Nancy first came bursting into the dark little hostel room, gasping out the news that his lordship was below, Susan had been incredulous, then ecstatic. Then, when Nan told her she was not to come downstairs to greet him, but must wait till he should come to her, it had begun to seem that he was still displeased with her, and Susan had convinced herself that she was about to receive the most horrendous dressing-down. She stood by the window, quite still except for the hands which twisted her handkerchief. It seemed like forever before she heard a familiar footstep, and a quiet knock came on the door.

"What a face," said Courtney, as she looked at him. "I must be the greatest monster alive."

Susan smiled, rather crookedly. Her heart was pounding and her mouth felt dry.

"I have put you to a deal of trouble, I think, my lord. I am very sorry for it."

"You are not nearly as sorry, my dear, as I am. Are you ready to come home now?"

Susan frowned a little, not knowing how to take his tone.

"You may live wherever you like," he went on. "In

London, or at Queen's Crown. Or in the Castle, if you like. The chimneys smoke, rather, but it is charming in the snow. But tell me, how are you feeling?"

Susan was struck dumb. She had expected to confront a cold, forbidding autocrat in a very uncertain temper. But this man, in rumpled, rather dirty clothes, was gentle, soft-spoken, and even... shy? She must be imagining things. Lord Courtney had never been shy in his life.

Susan tried to smile again, but only succeeded in making her chin tremble and her lip quiver. Then somehow Courtney was across the room crushing her in his arms. He released her slowly, after a long moment, with an unsteady little self-deprecating laugh.

Susan's brown eyes were enormous. "You're glad to see me." It was half a statement, half a question.

He moved away, his hands thrust into his pockets.

"Yes, my dear, I am. I can understand that you do not wholly share in my feelings, however. I don't mean to force myself on you. We need not even live together, if you had rather not."

"But of course I want to live with you," she said, with a woman's instinct. "I was coming home, you know."

He looked at her, visibly perplexed.

"Monteuil said he had you incarcerated."

"In what?"

"In prison."

"Oh," said Susan. "Well, he did, in a way, but we escaped. That is, the nuns allowed us to. They were dear, really, though I did rather lose my temper. And the walk in the snow was beastly." She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "It took hours."

"In the *snow*? You walked for hours through the snow? In your condition?"

Susan averted her eyes.

"Oh," she said, with studied nonchalance, "I am quite fit, you know."

Courtney smiled. "You look fit. You have got buxom—it becomes you."

Susan looked up again, amazed to hear him speak in so relaxed a manner. It was Courtney's turn to avert his eyes.

He crossed the room and stood by the fireplace. For a long moment he gazed into the flames.

"For some time after we were married," he said finally, in a low voice, "I used to have nightmares, almost every night. Over and over I would dream of taking you, and each time your father would catch me and beat me. No matter what stratagem I employed—and I was wonderfully inventive—he would catch me, and humiliate me. Then one night I dreamed I came to you in your own bed, in your own room, in the dead of night. And I got away safe, finally, in my dream, though I stumbled over a chair and made a row that I feared would wake your father."

He pushed back a lock of hair from his cheek, and continued to stare into the fire.

"But you *did* come to my room," said Susan, "and you did stumble over a chair, and—"

"I know. It wasn't altogether a dream. But I thought it was. I honestly did not realize, until just recently, what really happened. Susan, you can't possibly know how sorry I am, for everything."

He swung round to face her, and would have gone on, but she waved away his apology, a little embarrassed, a great deal relieved.

"Let's just forget it, shall we? It was unfortunate, but it's done with. We'll make a new start."

Lord Courtney looked suddenly handsomer than she had ever seen him. His face was older now than the day it had first enchanted her; his mouth was deeper etched than the day she had first seen him smile his seductive smile. But he had never been handsomer.

"A new start?" he cried. "Oh, my love, if you can bear it, if you can only begin to forgive me, I swear to you, my darling—"

"Now that," interrupted Susan, "is a different kind of 'darling' than I have ever heard from you before. It is not a patronizing 'darling' or a bedroom 'darling,' but a real one!"

Her eyes sparkled, and then she laughed.

"A real 'darling'!" she repeated, as she sped into the arms that opened and closed again to clasp her tight.

He laughed too, and lifted her off her feet. She ruffled his hair.

"Is that why you were such a brute, Lee? You were in love with me, when you thought I had taken a lover and all that?"

He nodded. She kissed his cheek.

"How disagreeable for you. Were you very jealous?"

"Furiously."

Susan smiled. Then she sobered.

"I was, too. Of that horrible Clarke woman. Shall you continue to have mistresses?"

"I cannot think of anything that interests me less, at just this moment, my love. But I'm afraid that if I undertook to promise I would never have another woman again in my life, I should be deceiving both of us."

"Oh, I don't mind the occasional entertainment. But someone like Heather Clarke, when everyone knows, and... Lee, it's so difficult, and one feels so stupid when people make sly remarks, and—"

"Never," he said, holding her close. "Never. I swear."

"Lee, did you go away with her to the country that time, just after I was ill? Everyone said you did, but somehow... I mean, I couldn't say you had not, because you had not told me where you were going, but—"

"I was at Courtney, alone. Brooding over what Dr. Richardson had hinted at. I think it was then I realized how much I had come to love you. And I felt such a cad. I had debauched you without a thought in the world beyond the immediate pleasure of it. Then, simply to salvage my own pride, I married you and brought you into the world. You learned, through me, that the world—at least, my world—values selfish pleasure above honor, and honesty. When I thought you had turned my own code against me, I blamed you, of course, but I blamed myself as well. I believed I had corrupted you."

"My dear," said Susan, "I am not such a child as that. I have my own values. I assure you, I am quite as pig-headed in my way as you are in yours."

"And thank God for that," he smiled.

She laid her head on his shoulder, and they stood still

for some time. Several kisses were exchanged, sweet leisurely ones. Now they had all the time in the world.

A thought came to Susan as her husband was pulling the pins out of her hair, one by one.

"Who did you imagine my lover to be, anyway?"

"I daren't tell you. You'll laugh."

"Monteuil said you would think we were lovers, when he took me aboard his yacht. He said you would fight him."

"I did. And then—My God, you don't know the half of it! Come sit; I'll tell you the whole story. And you must tell me yours! What's this about the nuns? No, wait. Let me call up Gustaf, and we'll send him back to Queen's Crown with the news you are restored to us, safe and sound. Then we'll order up some breakfast—I don't think I've eaten in twenty-four hours—and start our stories from the beginning. And then..." He deposited his handful of hairpins on the table beside the bed. "Perhaps we'll just stop here for a few days. Would that please my lady?"

Susan nodded happily. She patted her hair into a semblance of order, and sat down on the bed. She leaned back among the pillows, while her husband rang the bell, and pulled off his boots.